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Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World  
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DONIN: Today is Monday, January 28, 2013. My name is Mary Donin. We are here in Rauner Library with Shan Williams, Dartmouth Class of 2012.

Okay, Shan, the first thing, to put all of your stories into context, we'd like to hear about how it is you ended up coming to Dartmouth, whether you had a mentor in high school who told you about it or you were contacted by the college for some reason for one of your many attributes, athletics or whatever. How did you end up coming here?

WILLIAMS: Well, I didn't know anything about Dartmouth. Obviously, you know about, you know, the main Ivies: you know, Princeton, Harvard, Yale. And I was actually decidedly not going to any of them. I decided they were all going to be snobby, and I was very, like—you know, that wasn't my personality. I wouldn't enjoy it. So I didn't even look at them. I think the only Ivy I had originally planned on applying to was Cornell because they have an international relations program, which is what I was interested in. I went to a college prep school, so we started doing application type things our junior year.

DONIN: Where was this? Where did you grow up?

WILLIAMS: St. Petersburg, Florida. And I went to Shorecrest Preparatory School. And so my junior year—you know, I've got my idea of places that I might be applying to, and I was definitely, you know, off the list. And I received the Dartmouth Book Award. We do a book awards for juniors for particular—I guess, you know, exemplary attitudes and behaviors and excelling students, something like that.

DONIN: Were you a good student in high school?

WILLIAMS: Relatively.

DONIN: How did Dartmouth find you?

WILLIAMS: Well, it's not through Dartmouth. It's through my school. They have about eight of them, so kind of major schools. So there was, like a University of Chicago one, Harvard, Stanford. There might have been an MIT one. I don't remember what the other ones were. I remember the University of Chicago one, though, because I wanted that one. [Laughs.] Because I wanted to go there. [Laughs.] And so I got the Dartmouth one, and I was, like, *Oh, mmm, Dartmouth. I don't know what that is.* [Laughs.] I mean, I sort of knew that it was important, and I talked to my college counselor about it. Her name was Mrs. Huck, and she said, "Well, you know, I really think that Dartmouth would be perfect for you. I think you would love it." And I was, like, *Sure. Like, Whatever you say.*

So I ended up applying. You know, it's a relatively simple application, which is always a benefit. And I came up for the, like, Dimensions Weekend, the prospective students weekend. You know, I had already kind of decided that my top two were BC-[Boston College], and Georgetown. And so I was, like, *Well, you know, maybe Dartmouth.* [Makes mumbling sounds.] *It's a good school.* You know, I got in. And I didn't get into Cornell. The other school, actually, that was on the third, my top three, the other one was Vanderbilt. And I didn't get into Vanderbilt either. So those were my only two rejections out of, like, fifteen schools. And I was, like, *Oh, my God, how did I not get into Vanderbilt?* [Laughs.]

And then—so I came up for the weekend, and I stayed with a senior in the kind of senior apartments. I stayed with her and her roommates, and they were all really nice. But, you know, the thing about seniors is that they're really disengaged by springtime. They're, like, ready to go. So I didn't actually spend very much time with her. [Laughs.] I just kind of went gallivanting around campus, and I went to a few different things. But I really *liked* it, and it was really warm when I was here. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Oh, yeah. When is it, May?

WILLIAMS: It's May, yeah! And, you know, I'm coming from Florida, and it's very warm at that point in Florida. So I remember, you know, I had on my, like, sweatshirt and everything, and I was, like, *Oh, I'm gonna be so cold.* And then I remember

sitting on the Green, you know, like, the days that I was visiting, and I was, like, *Wow, it's so warm!* And I was, like, talking to one of my friends. I was, like, "You know, I'm wearing a tank top right now!" [Laughs.] She was, like, "I *guess* that's a big deal." [Laughs.]

So that was a huge thing because it was all so sunny, and I went down to the river, and I fell in love with the river. But I didn't meet anybody else, which is interesting because whenever I talk to my friends that went to Dimensions, they were, like, "Oh, I met So-and-so and So-and-so. We kept in touch, and then when I got here, I knew them." I didn't meet anybody. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Well, who were you hanging out with?

WILLIAMS: No one. I was just kind of walking around, going to things. I remember that I did sit by this girl on the bus, and I, like, talked her head off. I was, like, so excited. And I was, like, "Yeah, I'm gonna go do this." And, "Where are you from?" And she was kind of, like [laughs], sitting there, like, *Oh, my God, please stop talking to me.* [Laughs.] But, you know, I kind of ran into her again, and she was very pleasant, so I guess I didn't really annoy her.

But anyway, I went to Dimensions, and I really liked it, so that was a huge factor. And I was, like, *Oh, I can see myself here. You know, it's not snobby at all. Everyone's really welcoming,* and, you know, they do a lot of singing for you and things. So I was, like, *This is kinda fun.* [Laughs.]

And then financial aid packages came in, and Dartmouth's was by far the most generous, so that was obviously—you know, even if I wanted to go somewhere else, that wasn't going to be the case. [Laughs.] So I ended up just picking Dartmouth, which wasn't a bad decision.

DONIN: It wasn't a hard decision, then.

WILLIAMS: No, not at all. After Dimensions, I liked it. So that was great. And then the financial aid package really just cemented the deal. Like I said, I mean, if I would have been, you know, "Hey, Dad, I'm really thinking about Georgetown," he would have been, like, you know, "Can't afford Georgetown. So—"

[Laughs.] So the financial aid package was actually the reason I ended up coming, but it was very helpful that I liked it, because otherwise it would have been really sad.

DONIN: So when you were here, in terms of whom you saw, did you see people of color? Did you feel like you'd fit in here?

WILLIAMS: I didn't see that many people of color. I mean, I saw them around, but the other thing: I came from a private school that looked a lot like Dartmouth. And that was one of the other reasons: It was a very comfortable atmosphere. I didn't come from a school that had a lot of students of color. I think out of my class of, like, 57, we might have had three black students in our class.

DONIN: Wow.

WILLIAMS: And I was the only girl by the time we graduated, and I had gone to school with, you know, with everyone in my class for a good eight years or so. So, you know, that wasn't something that I was thinking about at all. And, like I said, this experience is, like, very similar in a lot of ways to how my high school was, and it was never a problem then, so I didn't even think about it, you know? It was interesting because, you know, the way I graduated—that was the *main* focus. [Laughs.] It was very much a shift from the beginning to the end. But, no, I wasn't thinking about that at all, actually.

DONIN: So were you the first—do you have siblings? Were you the first in your family to go to college in your age—I mean, you know, not counting your parents. Did you have siblings that went to college before you?

WILLIAMS: No, no, I'm the oldest. I have a little brother. He's 15 now, so about a seven-year difference. And so I'm the oldest.

DONIN: So you made the first decision

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

DONIN: Okay. So how did your family feel about you going so far away?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was tough. I mean, I'm very close to my family. My mother died when I was 12, so it has just been my father and my brother and I, and we're very, very, very close. And I served a lot of times—you know, growing up I served very much like a dual role. You know, I would very much be in the kind of maternal role in a lot of ways. So I think it was a huge deal for me to go away from home, because I think ultimately my dad had pictured me, like, going to school down the street and living at home. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Right.

WILLIAMS: I don't think he had really come to grips with it. But the other thing that I think happened is that my dad went away for college. He's from Senegal, from Dakar, and he went off to France for college—in this very, you know, very typical kind of neocolonial relationships and things like that. And so it wasn't necessarily a big deal for him.

DONIN: No. He understood the travel.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm. And that kind of, like, "It's your job now to go away and learn and then come back." And so I think at that level he was fine with it, but I think he was also not ready for me to not be in the house. You know, I was such a huge, you know, support structure in the house and that type of thing, so it was tough.

DONIN: Yes, leaving them behind.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah, especially my little brother, because him and I are very, very, very close.

DONIN: So he was like, what—ten—when you left?

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

DONIN: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. And it was. It was tough, even after I—you know, even after I was here for a while, my family struggled a lot. My brother just really didn't adjust to school well. He had started going to school with me the year that I was graduating, my senior year, so he was—he might have been

younger than—yeah, he was in—I don't remember what grade, but he was in maybe, like, sixth grade or something like that. So I'd been taking him to school, and we'd gotten really close with that, too. So I think it was toughest for him, just not having me around, him being an only child all of a sudden. He wasn't ready for that. So he, like, got in trouble a lot in school and things like that, and I had a hard time kind of straddling both worlds, being so far away from home and then having to, like, readjust to school here.

DONIN: It was sort of a distraction, then.

WILLIAMS: It was very much a distraction my whole time that I was here. And, like, I went home every break. All of my off terms I spent at home, so, you know, sophomore winter I was home, freshman summer I was home, junior summer I was home, every break I was home. I think the only breaks I didn't go home was Thanksgiving, you know, because—

DONIN: So short.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, it's short, and, you know, you go home right again. I couldn't afford to go home twice. But every other break, I was at home, you know? Which was always interesting because a lot of—you know, your friends go off and go on all these trips and do internships and things, and I was, like, "No, I'm goin' home." But I needed it, every time.

So that straddling both of those situations while I was here was also very interesting, I think, and, you know, made my experience a little bit tougher but also, you know, made it a lot more meaningful. It put it in context all the time, you know? I always had that kind of—I was never allowed to be in the Dartmouth bubble all the time. You know, I couldn't just kind of go through Dartmouth and think, *Oh, this is, you know, my life now, and I've moved on, and now I'm a person*, and—you know, it was always, *I have this extra responsibility that I have to continuously pay attention to*, so I think that was really important for how I decided to make my experience here.

DONIN: So let's talk about how it was, say, your first term here. With this as a background, your focus—you know, your constant focus, obviously, back in Florida for a period of time, every

day, probably, were you able to sort of immerse yourself in the Dartmouth experience? Go off on—did you do a trip?

WILLIAMS: I did. I did. I did canoeing, which was exciting, because that's one I really wanted. I had been canoeing a few times. You know, there's a lot of rivers in Florida. My best friend's really outdoorsy, and her family is really outdoorsy. So, you know, I would do a lot of different things like that with them. And so I was really excited. I went on a DOC trip. I loved it. I was, like, *Oh, my gosh, this is awesome! I get to be outdoorsy. I always wanted to do that.* I thought that I was going to be in the DOC. Like, I knew. I was, like, *I'm gonna go on all the canoeing trips. I'm gonna to go, like hang out all the time. It'll be so much fun.* [Laughs.] Of course, that never happened. [Laughs.]

But, yeah, I mean, it was very easy for me to throw myself into the Dartmouth experience because, like I said, it was familiar. You know, I went to a school that was very much that way, and I loved my high school. I had a great experience. You know, a lot of my best friends were there. I was very close with all the faculty and the staff members there, you know. When you go to a private school that's so small and for so long, you really become a part of that community. And so I was very excited to have a new community, and I was, like, *I'm gonna have two alma maters*, you know? [Laughs.] Which was, like, *This is gonna be High School Part Two.* [Laughs.]

And so I immediately kind of jumped into student assembly. That was the first thing I did. Like I said, having had experience that I thought would be very similar, I had an idea of how I might go about doing it, and for me, the really big part of my high school experience was being a part of the student council.

DONIN: Student government.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm, because for me, it's very much a kind of giving back to the community and staying engaged in the community. So, like, all four years of high school, I was in the student council, and my senior year I was one of the co-presidents. And so I was, like, *Okay, I'm gonna do that. that's gonna be the first thing I do when I get to Dartmouth.*

So I was, like, I guess, a cluster representative, what they have for freshman classes, so each cluster has, like, two representatives, and they kind of represent the freshman class in, you know, student assembly.

DONIN: What makes up a cluster?

WILLIAMS: I guess it's probably Dartmouth's way of doing residential colleges. They're kind of just like groups of dorms that are together.

DONIN: Oh, I see. Like the East Wheelock Cluster.

WILLIAMS: Exactly, exactly.

DONIN: Those kind of clusters.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm. I lived in the River—you know, [Makes sounds.] [Laughs.] So I was, you know, one of the only River Cluster representatives, and so I was immediately in student assembly, and then I kind of joined—I guess the way—I don't know if it still works this way now, because I stopped really being involved. [Laughs.] But at the time, we had these kind of committees, and so within student assembly there was, like, you know, the major, like group of all the representatives and things, and then there was, like, smaller committees. And so the committee that I joined was diversity and community affairs, which, you know, kind of goes along with my whole theme, so I figured that made sense.

*And so that was my first kind of, like, I'm in Dartmouth. I'm a part of the student assembly. You know, I'm gonna know what's happening on campus. I want to know what the issues are and those types of things. I want to be able, you know, [to] have a hand in how things work and how things effect change and that nature.*

But then I also joined—there's an indie-rock group. They call it Friday Night Rock. And that was something that I was really into in high school, but I never really had friends that were into it, so I'd always be kind of, like, going off and doing these things by myself and kind of dragging my friends along to, like, these concerts and things. So that was one of those things I was really excited about. I said, *Oh, I'm in college*

*now! I can be with people like me!* [Laughs.] And they were all really, really too indie for me, actually. [Laughs.] I remember sitting in a meeting going, *Well, I have no idea who you're talking about. Like, I don't know any of these groups.* [Laughs.] They're all, like, in skinny pants and, like, cool haircuts, and that was, like, *Uhh!* But they're all really cool, so I enjoyed that.

And then I also wrote for the music magazine. I was one of the interviewers for that. What else did I do? I did a lot of things my freshman year. I was kind of, like, *I'm gonna try everything.* [Laughs.]

And then, you know, I was also involved in the Afro-American Society, which is, you know, what I ended up doing, and that was my focus for, you know, all of college. But it started there very tentatively, because I didn't quite know what that meant. [Laughs.] You know, I just kind of assumed that it was, like, a diversity group.

One of the other things that I did in high school was we started a diversity, like, club, basically. We didn't have anything like that on campus, and, you know, having a predominantly white campus, you can't really—you know, you have to have those conversations. And so one of my close mentors and I, you know, started talking about it early on in my freshman year, and I went to a conference for it, and we, like, talked about how other schools did it. And so we started on.

And so when I came here, I was, like, *Oh, of course Afro-American Society*, something like that, you know? You know, I don't even know who calls themselves Afro-American anymore. [Laughs.] And I went, and I was thinking, *Man, all these kids are way too black for me! I'm not this black!* [Laughs.]

But all of my friends that I had started to, you know, spend time with, you know, were all a part of this society, and so I kind of joined and started hanging out with them. And it was where my friends were, so I spent more and more time there.

So those were, like, the main things that I did. My goal was, like, *I'm going to just do everything, and if I don't like it, then I*

*won't do it anymore, you know, but I'm gonna try a bunch of stuff. Which was very helpful, I think, because I ended up having a lot of different experiences that my friends who hadn't branched out at the beginning didn't have and wished they had by the time senior year came around.*

And so it was interesting because, you know, my freshman year I kind of went and did everything and then kind of narrowed my focus by the time senior year came around, whereas all of my friends kind of did the opposite kind of cone effect and started branching out when they were seniors.

And so I remember having a conversation with my roommates, and they were, like, "Yeah! I guess I didn't know about the Bema." [Laughs.] It was, like, "What are you talking about? I love the Bema. That's my favorite spot on campus. And all these different, like, very stereotypical Dartmouth things I had done already. And so I remember thinking, *Well, this is so interesting. Like [laughs], I don't care about any of this stuff anymore. I already did that.*

- DONIN: It sounds like you were much more sort of self-confident about sort of putting yourself out there—
- WILLIAMS: Mm-hm. Right, right.
- DONIN: —as a lowly freshman—
- WILLIAMS: Right.
- DONIN: —whereas a lot of people—
- WILLIAMS: Don't have that experience at the beginning.
- DONIN: —have the feeling of, *Oh, I'm a loser or I'm not gonna have any friends.*
- WILLIAMS: Mm-hm. Or *I'm on the bottom of the totem pole. I can't really—*
- DONIN: Yeah, *How can I fit in?*
- WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DONIN: But you didn't experience any of that.

WILLIAMS: Like I said, I mean, a lot of it had to do with the fact that I went to a place that was familiar and comfortable in many ways. You know, it was almost as if someone had just kind of, like, quadrupled the size of my high school and put it in the middle of nowhere. You know, that's very much how I felt all the time being here. And so, you know, dealing with the kind of general sense of affluence that you have—that was not new to me. There's people in my school that—you know, whose parents own, like, chains of banks, you know? It was, like, *This is not new for me*. You know, my best friend has a gigantic house. Like, none of those things were, like, off-putting and intimidating to me, because I had already done, in ways that, like—you know, I had done it and succeeded, you know? So for me it was not something that I was afraid of, where I was going to shy away from because I was, like, *Yeah*. But, like, at the end of the day, like, I still had a better G.P.A.—like, *I'm not afraid of you*, you know.

DONIN: So did academics—was that okay? You slid right into that okay?

WILLIAMS: Well, sort of. I did very well my freshman year because in a lot of ways my high school was tougher than Dartmouth, in some respects. I think the thing that really got me was the pacing. It's really easy to kind of get away with slacking, you know, and poor study skills when you have a full semester. [Laughs.] So I think the first thing that really just kind of bit me in the butt was how fast the quarter was. So my freshman fall was pretty decent. And then winter was, like, a little—winter is a shorter term. It's cold and dark outside. So that one was not so good. But, you know, spring was good again.

And so, like, for me the rigor of the classes wasn't necessarily that tough. I think had I decided that academics were important to me, my sophomore year, I would have been a lot more successful here—[Laughs.]—academically. But I think the thing that really happened is that emotionally I didn't have—I never had that kind of conflict of, you know, emotionally not engaging with my work. And so that really, really made it tough for me to do well in classes because I

wasn't thinking—I wasn't thinking about class when I was in class. When I would leave class, I was thinking about home, I was thinking about, you know, so many other things, and so I think learning that balance took me a very long time, and that was something that I hadn't had any experience with.

So I would have done better here if I would have decided to do better here, but I think I came to the conclusion my junior year—and obviously everything, you know, when you think backwards, is kind of on this long timeline, so I was having a hard time working chronologically.

But my junior year was the time when I kind of decided that—you know, I figured, *This is the only time I'm gonna have to figure out who I am as a person*, and so I think I spent more of my energies working on those types of things than on academics, because for me, it wasn't—I didn't need to prove anything anymore. [Laughs.] I just needed to graduate. It would still say Dartmouth. And I wasn't ever trying to do anything that would require me to, like, excel or anything, so for me it ended up becoming—you know, *This is more important*. For me to figure out who I was was a more important use of my time while I was here. *As long as I'm not failing, I'm okay*. [Laughs.] And little did I know trying to figure out who I was would be way, way, way more challenging than any class I've ever been in.

DONIN: Who helped you with that?

WILLIAMS: I guess my dean. My junior year, I was—well, hmmm. When did it start? My sophomore year, sophomore summer I was really, really, really depressed. Like, I've never been depressed before in my life, and I've been through enough things that might make someone, you know, be depressed. But I was really, really depressed, and I was having this really hard time kind of figuring out my sense of purpose and my sense of self and place, and so I was having all these kind of, like, intellectual, like, battles. Like, *Why am I here?* Like, *What is the point of this?* You know, *I should be at home*. You know, a lot of it had to do with me feeling like my place was at my house, you know, with my family. And I could never really justify why I was here in this space, you know? Especially because I think the environment around here is so selfish, you know. I was struggling all the time with

the kind of, like, individualism of Dartmouth. And so—which happens. To be very successful here, you really have to think of yourself because you can't afford to think of anything else.

DONIN: But you had another obligation.

WILLIAMS: All the time. All the time. And my brother was having a really hard time in school, you know? He was getting in trouble a lot and having a hard time making friends and those types of things, and I think those had to do with him having me at home all the time. And, like, there was no transition. You know, there was no, "All right, well, I'm not gonna be here as much," you know, because even well until I was, like, you know, 17, my brother was coming with me to things. My dad would kind of make me take him along. [Laughs.] Because he [my dad] was, like, "He's [my brother] gonna be home by himself? No, you gotta take him with you." And so there was no transition to that time where "I'm just not gonna be around as much." So for me to just disappear from the house I think was really tough. And so that was always kind of nagging at me, so I could never really be truly here.

DONIN: Nor could you indulge in the job of figuring out "who I am."

WILLIAMS: Right, right. Exactly, exactly. And so my sophomore summer—like I said, I was really just having this hard time. I was kind of like, *I don't*—I was a French major, and I knew that I was going to be a French major. Like, in high school, like I was in A.P. French, and I loved it. I went to France. I was, like, *This is what I'm gonna do with my life*. And my dad speaks French. He's, you know, from Senegal. And so I was, like, *I'm gonna do French*.

And my sophomore year was when I was, like, *God, I hate French!* [Laughs.] I was, like, *I can't stand this major! I don't know what the point of it is*. You know, I thought that I wanted to do ambassadorial work and I was, like, *I don't wanna do that*. Like, I didn't know what I wanted to do anymore. I didn't know, you know, why I was taking the classes that I was taking. You know, I enjoyed my friends. They were all very strong people, but they couldn't understand where I was coming from. And so that was tough

for me. And no one seemed to get it, either, and so I just was really depressed. I was just, like, not happy.

DONIN: It must have been lonely for you, too. Wasn't it lonely?

WILLIAMS: Well, the nice thing about it—I mean, I did a good job of picking great friends from the beginning. I had a very close group of four or five girlfriends. You know, those always kind of shift. But, they're very strong women also. And, you know, I think it has to do with us all kind of empowering each other, but they were all very strong women. So we lived together. Four of us lived together my sophomore summer. So it was really positive to have them around.

But I think everyone kind of went through something at the same time and really had that—which happens to everybody, I think, when you get to that halfway point. So they weren't that helpful because they were trying to figure out what *they* wanted to do. My roommate had been in engineering, and she was, like, "I hate engineering. I don't want to be an engineer. I don't know how to get outta this." So that was, like, her dilemma. You know, everyone was kind of having that moment. But I think mine was probably the most profound.

And so I would just be in my room. I wouldn't come out. You know, I would just, like, lay in bed all day, and they were just, like, "I don't know what's wrong with you." And so eventually I went and talked to my dean, who—you know, I don't know if you know about the Dartmouth advising system and how poor it has been the past few years. I mean, they're working on it, so—but, you know, a lot of deans coming in now. So I had multiple deans, and I didn't really know who was who, so I kind of just went to the first person that would talk to me.

And it was Dean Thum, and she has a background I guess in psychology, so I think that helped, I think. [Laughs.] You know, she spoke to me in a way that was, like, "I understand that things are happening." And so she would advise me at the time to, "Hey, maybe you should take some time off. Maybe you should go home and figure things out if that's where you feel like you're having the most struggle." And I'm going, "I can't go home! Like, what are you talking about?"

Like, this is what I came here to do. I can't go home. We don't have time for that." And so I didn't go home.

But I think she finally convinced me that at least, like, go home for a short period of time, so I kind of called my dad, and I was, like, "Dad, I'm comin' home." And he was, like, "Well, I don't have any money. Like, I can't buy you a plane ticket." And I was, like, "It's fine. I already bought it. I worked a little bit, and"—because I've had a job ever since I've been here, and I was, like, "I already bought the ticket. Don't worry. I'm comin' home. Just can you be at the airport?" [Laughs.] And he was, like, "Are you okay?" And I was, like, "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

And at the time, my dad's girlfriend had been with him for a very long time, and so she's very much like a second mom to me, and I remember her calling me and, like, "Are you okay? Did something happen? Did someone do something to you?" And I was, like, "No. No, no, no!" And I think she thought that I was pregnant or that I had been raped—something, you know, really, really terrible. And I was, like, "No, I just have to come home."

So I, like, went home. And we had, like, breakfast, and it was just like normal. I don't think we did anything. I think eventually everyone at my house was kind of like, "You're not gonna leave without telling me what's going on." [Laughs.] And I was just, like, "Uh, I just don't know, you know, what I'm doing there. I don't know, like, what is the purpose of my education." Like, all of these kind of profound things.

Fortunately, my dad is also very much into, like, philosophy, so—[Laughs.]—it wasn't too far off of a conversation for him. But he was very much kind of, like, "You know, we all go through it, and you have to figure it out. It's part of being an adult. We'll be here for you. But know that everyone goes through this. You're not different." "Well, ok, ok." It kind of made me feel better. Not really! [Laughs.] But I think my dad was, like, "This is the actual right answer. I can't tell you anything else," you know?

So I think I was home for, like, maybe three days or something like that. I, like, flew home that Thursday, and

then I was home, and I flew back on Monday. So, you know, it's a long—

DONIN: Long weekend.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. It's a long—I took the weekend off, though, I think. I think I missed a class on Monday. I just kind of told my professors that I wasn't going to be in class. [Laughs.]

It's funny because, like, to get home is a long flight. Like, you know, you obviously had to get on the coach, which is two and half hours and then get into Boston, and then I usually take, like, a transfer. That's two and a half hours, another two and a half hours. So it takes, like, eight hours to get home. It's most of the day. So most of my time I was traveling, anyway. [Laughs.] Which is also good. You know, just to kind of literally be going away from Dartmouth, just in transit, away from Dartmouth, and I wasn't ready to come back, but I had to because I think it was the week before the last week of classes. And so the last week of classes I, like, scrambled through finals—like, whffffff. It was rough. And then I was back home again for the break.

DONIN: Oh.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, so it was, you know, a very short period of time. I think I left at, like—I ended up dropping a class that term. My dean was, like, "Three classes is a lot. Just take two. It'll be fine." And so I dropped a class when I came back, and she had tried to tell me to take time off—[Laughs.]—and I didn't. And so, of course, I just stayed on all of junior year instead of taking a break. So that would be—that's spring, summer, fall, winter, spring again. Terrible, terrible for my psyche, my junior year.

DONIN: Junior year?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I was on five terms in a row. Instead of taking time off, I just stayed on forever. [Laughs.] Because I started to feel like I was behind, you know. I was, like, *I have to really spend time in my classes and get my GPA up, because now I've just, like, tanked it, you know, in the past two terms, so I really just have to be here, take classes. I can't my GPA up if I'm at home.* And, like, so much—like, GPA, GPA, GPA,

because it was pretty bad. You know, you can't drop a class at the end [of the term]; that counts [towards your gpa].

And I think the other thing that had happened: My—hmm, one of my—oh, I guess the other thing that happened: I didn't go to France my sophomore winter because I was having a really hard time in French, mainly because I didn't like it, and I should have decided that I didn't like it sooner. And so I just really wasn't—I was having a hard time, like, staying engaged with the class, and my work wasn't really getting done very well. And so I, like, puttered out, like, a B-minus. And you have to get a B. You have to have a B average to go to Paris for the FSP. I really didn't want to go to Paris. I, like, wanted to go to Toulouse. But you can't go to Toulouse when you pass those classes, because I came in with already a lot of credits in French. And so I was just kind of, like, *I guess I'll go on the FSP. It'll be good.* So that was a whole 'nother thing. So that didn't help my GPA either.

So I just had this pressure of, like, *Oh, my God, I have to do better.* So all of my junior year I was trying to, like, pick it up, which obviously didn't work because—[Laughs.]—I should have gone home! And I was, like, *I can't afford to take another off term also. I've already taken two.* Like, *I don't wanna*—it was just really poor.

DONIN: What was your state of mind at this point?

WILLIAMS: I was so depressed. I was so depressed. And my roommates were really concerned, and they didn't know what to do about it. And by that point, my dean said, "Maybe you should see a counselor," and so I was, like, "Okay." So I started seeing a counselor, and that was helpful. You know, it was nice to talk about things. But the beginning of counseling is not necessarily progress yet, and so I was just kind of, like, walking around. I didn't always go to class. I didn't always feel like it. I would stay in my bed and not do anything. And the winter is always a rough time for me anyway because it's cold and dark, and so my junior year winter was just terrible. Oh, my God, it was terrible!

And I started becoming involved with my boyfriend now, which never helped because, like, it was never a thing, so it was always confusing, and that doesn't help. [Laughs.] And

so, you know, boys have a way of making things worse. They're never actually the problem, but they have a way of making things just so much worse.

And so it was just—junior year was terrible. And that was bad for my GPA, and so, as a result, I didn't finish with a very good GPA, just because that whole block of time was just— [Makes sound.] And I think I dropped, like, a class—my junior winter I dropped a class. I think I failed a class my fall. Like, it was just, like, all bad.

Spring was better. But, you know, I had been working on things for a very long time. And it was interesting because I remember one of the—the moment when I realized, *Well, you know, at least I'm not dumb.* [Laughs.] One of the things—well—so I think the thing that was really helpful is that I went to my dean, and when I saw that going to my dean was a good thing, even though it was kind of my last resort.

When I started meeting with a counselor, you know, I thought, *Well, maybe I should just kind of build a support network right now, you know, because I feel like this is gonna be necessary for me to have, because I don't really know how everything works right now. It seems like it's gonna be productive for me to have one.*

So I also got an academic coach, so I started meeting with Carl Thum, which is funny because that's Dean Thum's husband, and they're just—I wonder if they ever talked about me at dinner or something. [Laughs.] But I remember sitting in his office—and he's such a great guy. And he was saying, "Well, you know, how do you study?" You know, because we were trying to figure out, "Well, how do we get the GPA up? Let's work on that," because that was one of my huge, you know, kind of pressures. And I was telling him all the techniques, you know. And he was, like, "Well, studying doesn't seem to be your problem. Maybe you should see a counselor." [Laughs.] And I was thinking, *Well, obviously. I went to a college prep school. Like, I know how to do this! Like, this is not actually that hard for me.* And so I had this—

The other thing that was always eating away at me is I knew that I could excel here very easily, you know, because I was

prepped to do this. You know, that's what my school taught me to do, was be, you know, successful in a place like Dartmouth, socially and academically. But emotional was never a part of it, and so I didn't have the tools or the equipment to do that. And so I think the reason I never quite just petered out and transferred or whatever was because I had built that network really early on. Once I saw that having a dean was helpful, I just kind of figured I'd fill in all the gaps.

And so I'd been meeting with the coach, with the academic coach. It wasn't necessarily that productive, because I didn't necessarily need the academic skills. I mean, you know, we did—time management was a thing. You know, it was kind of other things were productive, but ultimately I knew what to do; I just wasn't doing it. [Laughs.]

So, yeah. How does that answer "community"? I don't know! [Laughs.]

DONIN: Well, let's just finish this line.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

DONIN: The we'll get back to talking about your community. So what's the end of the story?

WILLIAMS: I don't know.

DONIN: You sort of worked through this depression.

WILLIAMS: Yes, yes. I mean, I still have trouble with it now. I mean, I think the other thing is I came to find that it's not necessarily—it's an anxiety that manifests itself as a depression, and so anxiety is something that, you know, everyone has to deal with. So once I started combatting, like, you know, anxiety, I was more successful. And so I was just kind of working on: *How do we prevent things from being a problem before they're problems*, you know? And things like that.

But I remember I was always—I really enjoyed meeting with my counselor. She's wonderful. Because I would always just ask her, you know, these questions, like, "But, but, why?" [Laughs.] And she goes, "I don't know! I can't answer that

question!” [Laughs.] I just remember I always enjoyed having the dialogue with her.

But, you know, the interesting thing about that was that I never felt like I should meet with her initially, because I also figured, *You know, at some point in time they're gonna charge me for this!* [Laughs.] Like, *I assume that you can only go for free while you need it*, you know? And so I was, like, *Well, do I need it right now? Because what if they decide that I don't need it? I, like, can't afford it.* So I just, like, would never go until—you know, my dean would go, “Well, are you meeting with your counselor?” And I was, like, “Well, no.” She’s, like, “Well, maybe we should meet with her. I’m gonna make a meeting.” And I would always let her do it because I always felt like, *Well, at some point in time they're gonna charge me. I can't afford to go to counseling.* [Laughs.] What was my point with that? I don’t remember.

But, yes, we worked through it over time. And it was helpful having that because I think after that I just kind of went every term, even though it took me a while to go. It wouldn’t be till, like, week three or week four. But I would eventually go, and it was always very helpful. And I think having my friends being so solid was really helpful, too, because I kind of built a little miniature family, and that was necessary.

And the other thing that was really helpful is after sophomore summer, I figured, *I'm doing too many things. I should cut them out. I should really focus on classes.* And my junior fall, I was miserable. I was, like, *I can't stand being here. Like, there's nothing that I enjoy that I'm doing, and I don't necessarily like my classes.*

DONIN: Did you ever change your major?

WILLIAMS: I did. I ended up changing it junior spring unofficially and officially senior fall, so I changed it to African and African-American Studies. And that was mainly because all the time that I was spending—well, so—after I wasn’t doing any extracurriculars, my dean was, like, “Well, of course you’re not going to enjoy it here. You’re not doing anything that you like.” And I was, like, “Okay.” So I ended up, you know, really involving myself in the Afro-American Society, and I, like, served as the historian, and I really liked that. And so that

was one of the reasons that I ended up changing my major, because I was, like, *I love this! This is great! This is what I want to do all the time.* I'm reading books about it. I'm not doing my homework. I'm reading, like, you know, Booker T.'s *Up from Slavery*. You know, I'm reading all these—you know, all these books and things, and so I just kind of shifted my focus and made it what I was doing academically. And that helped so much! [Laughs.]

In my senior year I was taking all triple AS [AAAS] classes. Every term was a triple AS—

DONIN: Oh, that's right.

WILLIAMS: All African and African-American Studies classes. So I would have, you know, a term of three African and African-American Studies classes for, you know, a whole year. So I took a lot of classes, because I had to make up for not having taken anything before that.

DONIN: Did your group of friends change, or did you—

WILLIAMS: Same group.

DONIN: Same group?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, which is interesting because it was also another reason—I joined a sorority, sophomore fall when everyone rushes. And I thought that I was going to shift because, you know, when everyone joins a sorority, they have new friends now, and they're all friends in the sorority. But I didn't necessarily get along with those girls. And I had a group of friends already that I really enjoyed, and they were wonderful, so there was no reason ever for me to kind of branch out and get new friends. So I had the same friends the whole time.

DONIN: What was the point of the sorority, then?

WILLIAMS: Well, it's part of my involving myself in Dartmouth, you know? I mean, well into my sophomore year, I was very much still in the same mindset of *this is Dartmouth, and I'm doing Dartmouth things because I go here and I'm a student*

*at Dartmouth, and look at all these Dartmouth things. So it was part of that.*

I thought very much about joining Alpha Kappa Alpha, the [historically] black sorority. I even went home and I did all the prep, you know, because they have a very rigorous program. You have to, like, interview and all those types of things. And so I kind of set it up as if I—you know, if I wanted to do it, I had all of the things. You had to have a letter of recommendation and things like that. So I went home that summer, and I was, like, *Okay, a lot of my mom's friends are AKAs. But I ended up not doing it. The girls were not very nice.* [Laughs.]

DONIN: Oh!

WILLIAMS: I mean, that happens. The thing about the [historically] black sorority and fraternities is that there's a sense of honor that goes along with it, you know? And [so] it's kind of understood that the first—your first time—like, your first, like, term in it, you're very excited, and a little bit snobby, you know, because you're, like, *Well, I have this honor, and I'm really important. Look at me now,* you know. And it wears off, all the time, but it's true of everyone because that's part of how it works, is this is an honor, you know, and you have to recognize it as an honor, and everyone kind of walks around—

So these girls, the girls that were there, that had just gotten their letters when I was thinking about it, had that [air of] snobbery, because they [were the newest members] and this is important, and "I'm so important. Look at me." Which, if I had given it some time, it might have worn off, but at the time it was very off-putting, and I was, like, *I don't wanna do that.* [Laughs.] And so I rushed. I was, like, *I'm not even going to give this a second thought.*

DONIN: So getting into Alpha Kappa Alpha is a different process than rushing the other sororities?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. It is—I mean, it's more rigorous, and they take smaller numbers because they're a smaller organization. And so, you know, you have to—there's a national mandate for how it works, you know, and, like I said, there's an

application process. You have to have a letter of recommendation. You know, you have to have, you know, a certain GPA and a certain amount of community service. Like, it's a very—you know, it's almost like joining an honor society, in a lot of ways. And so you can't just decide to do it all of a sudden. [Laughs.] You can't. And they don't do their intake until the spring. So, like I said, those girls were new. They had just come. It's their first time on campus. They made it. Like, "Look at us." And so they're a little—I didn't know that.

You know, I didn't come from that tradition in my house. My mom had friends. My grandmother was an AKA. But I didn't come from a tradition where I would understand how that might work. So for me, it was, like, *Uh! I don't want to have anything to do with that. That's not important. Look at you guys. Like, you think you're so cool. You're not so cool. I don't even know who you are.* [Laughs.] You know?

DONIN: What sorority did you join?

WILLIAMS: Alpha Phi. It's a national sorority. I think it's, like, mainly in the Northeast and, like, the Midwest. But I thought very much about Delta Delta Delta and Kappa Kappa Gamma, because in the South, those are the two big ones. And so all of my friends that stayed, you know, in the South and stayed in Florida were in either of those two organizations. Or my friends, the girls that I went to school with. And so I was, like, *Okay. Well, you know, that's probably what I'll do because, you know, that's what everybody else in my school did.* And I kind of went through [those sororities], and I was, like, *I don't like these girls.* I didn't necessarily not like them. I just really liked the girls in Alpha Phi more, and so that's the house that I ended up choosing.

DONIN: But that still did not become your sort of central community.

WILLIAMS: No, not at all. I didn't see the purpose of it, because I also had decided early on that I wasn't going to drink until I turned 21. I couldn't see the purpose of it, and that is such a huge part of the Greek system here. Like, I mean, you know, it's notorious for it. And so not drinking—you have a very different perspective of it. And, you know, when you're in it and you are consuming alcohol, it's great because it's

[alcohol] free and it's everywhere. It's what everyone else is doing, so you feel very comfortable. When you're *not*, though, you have to really re-engage in the atmosphere, and a lot of interactions were pretty meaningless. [Laughs.] And so that wasn't entertaining for me. And I think the girls in my house were still very young, and I didn't see the older girls being very, like, mentor-like.

And I had all these ideas of what being in a mainstream sorority would be like, especially coming from the South. I mean, you know, like baskets with the sorority colors and bows and paddles and cute things and—you know, we'd always be baking, and we'd have a house, and we'd look pretty all the time, and we'd do our hair. You know, like—and I had been watching the show. There's a show on—

DONIN: It sounds like 1950s.

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. But I loved—I'm very much a traditionalist.

DONIN: Yes.

WILLIAMS: In some ways. And very, very not, in a lot of ways. But I liked those—like, "Let's celebrate being feminine together, and, like, empower each other around it." That was my idea. [Laughs.]

DONIN: So you stayed with this original community of women that you had.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: Did you—you know, your experience here is so different than other people we've talked to, because you jumped in with both feet, you had this other, major distraction with your commitment to your family down in Florida. I'm amazed you had time to do any academics at all or, frankly, were able to focus at all. But did you ever—throughout all of this, did race ever play a role in your relationship with Dartmouth or your social life or anything?

WILLIAMS: It did. And I guess I'm surprised at myself for not having mentioned this before. I mean, like I said, it ended up being my major. This is, like—race studies is what I do now. It's

such a huge part of my identity. And it wasn't, coming in. And I think a lot of it had to do with my group of friends. They were all black, you know? And this is the first time in my life that I had all black friends. Like, I grew up— I was born in Atlanta, which is, like, the black Mecca, right? But we moved back to my mom's hometown of St. Petersburg when I was maybe 9 or so. And so I had that background when I was there—you know, very much involved in what was going on. And my uncle taught at Morehouse. You know, so very much that was a part of my family when I was in Atlanta.

But when I moved down to Florida, it was a little bit different, which is where all of my immediate family is on my mother's side. And so anything having to do with race generally had to do with my family, but it wasn't more than that. St. Petersburg is kind of a weird place where, like—

DONIN: Is it a big black population?

WILLIAMS: Sort of. It's like—I mean, it's coastal, and it's classically known as a retirement capital, so you have a lot of people from up North going down South, and so that's kind of also the tradition of my school. As a day school, it's very much kind of in the Northern style. And so it's not—segregation wasn't a huge thing, as far as I understand the history, and there wasn't so much racial turmoil as it was in other places, like close by. And so that's not a huge part of the atmosphere there. And I have always been in classes that were mainly white, even when I lived in Atlanta, so that was never necessarily something I was thinking of.

So then when I moved to Florida and my mother died, I was with my father, who's African, you know. And so always kind of straddling different experiences, so it never was something that stuck with me.

But then when I came here, all of my friends were black. And I remember I called my aunt, and I was saying, "Yeah! All of my friends are black!" And she was, like, "Well, this is exciting," because they had always said I was going to have a white boyfriend. [Laughs.] And my best friends from home are all white.

So it was, like, *Oh, well, this is new, and this is fun, and they're all just like me, so this is cool and exciting*, because all of the other black people that I had met at home were kind of through my job, and there's a class difference there. Not that I necessarily come from a higher class, but I've always, like, been in that environment. And so that was different, because I never could relate necessarily—because what they were doing extracurricularly was not what I was doing, so I never really related necessarily in the experience that I was in [socially], and that [experience] I was working [in]. So, you know, you get a different class of people.

And so this was the first time I had people that were doing the things that I liked. They were like me. And so I just made friends with all of them. [Laughs.] So race became a factor then because I realized, from my friends, how important it was. And it was a completely different interaction. And, you know, I appreciated having people that were like me, and I didn't know that that was a thing [before]. And that was exciting, you know? And I was, like, *Oh, my mom used to do that too! No way!* You know. And so that was really *fun* for me.

And then I engaged in the community. And, granted, you know, I didn't grow up in an all-black tradition, and so things like the black church were unfamiliar to me. You know, my school wasn't all black, so that experience was different to me. But my family, you know, was still my family. And so a lot of those experiences I could relate to somehow; they just weren't necessarily my everyday experience.

And so I started to engage in the Afro-American Society, which is kind of like the community group, if you will. Not everyone is necessarily a part of it, but you can be. And so that's when the race started to play a factor, was when I started realizing, *Oh, well, this is where I'm spending most of my time. This is the most comfortable space for me. This is the most comfortable community that I'm engaging in. This is where I find that I am always, you know, focused.*

And so then race was important. And it's interesting: When you become a part of a community, you realize who's not in the community. You know, you realize who's choosing not to be in the community or how your community is perceived

and things like that. And so it was interesting always having, you know, that larger Dartmouth community and having had that experience, and then also being a part of this kind of smaller subset of the Dartmouth community that had very different interests than the kind of larger Dartmouth community. And so that was always, at times, conflicting. But, you know, it was always, like, something that I was straddling while I was here, as well, doing both. And eventually I just kind of came into this community solely, but that's mainly because the other things that I were doing just weren't as important, for various other reasons.

DONIN: So you dropped your sort of student government stuff at the end of—

WILLIAMS: I did. I did. I thought they were ineffective. [Laughs.] And I'm very much a person about efficiency, and I thought that, you know, it was a lot of people sitting around a room talking about things, that were kind of putting them on their résumé, and I—even in high school, that was one of the things that I hated, you know. *Don't just do things because it goes on the résumé. You have to care about it. You have to care about everything!* [Laughs.] Which is also very tiring.

DONIN: And you couldn't have sustained the amount of commitment that you had to all these different—

WILLIAMS: Yes.

DONIN: —activities.

WILLIAMS: Exactly.

DONIN: You couldn't sustain that.

WILLIAMS: Exactly. And I started serving the smaller community anyway, in the same respects, which I thought—I found to be more effective.

DONIN: The black community.

WILLIAMS: The black community. And so student assembly had less and less purpose because I thought, *Well, 1) no one is sitting here doing anything, and 2) it's a bunch of people who, like,*

*kind of cared but not really, you know? And then, you know, the students aren't engaged with student assembly in a way for it to be effective. So I don't know what the point of this is. So I started to disengage from it, and then eventually I just wasn't—like, probably about my junior year, I just wasn't even showing up to things anymore.*

DONIN: So how do you see the black community fitting into the larger Dartmouth community?

WILLIAMS: I mean, I think—I mean—

DONIN: And as a background to this, to put it in context with this interview, that session that we were both at on Friday afternoon following the harassment—

WILLIAMS: Right.

DONIN: —incidences that have taken place on campus in the last—

WILLIAMS: With students of color, yeah.

DONIN: Yeah. You know, I came away from that feeling that the black community is really alienated right now from the larger Dartmouth community.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

DONIN: And they were valid stories—

WILLIAMS: Right.

DONIN: —and examples of that.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: Has that always been the case? Was that the case when you an undergrad?

WILLIAMS: Well, you know, it's interesting because, like I said, I—well, I thought about this before, when I was thinking about this interview, and I was thinking, you know, if you would have asked me about community two weeks ago, it would have been very different than right now, in light of recent events.

And so I guess—has it always been alienated? No. I think there has always been a separation of experiences. But I think it has to do with the intersection of class, very much so. I think there's a different class experience at Dartmouth depending on which one you identify with and which one you're more familiar with.

DONIN: You don't mean Class of 2012.

WILLIAMS: No, class as in socioeconomic, mm-hm.

DONIN: Yes. Right. Okay.

WILLIAMS: And I think the traditions of Dartmouth—they're very elite. And I think if this is a new experience for you, it's hard to feel engaged in the Dartmouth community, whereas I am very used to the elitism. I went through— The things that I think some freshmen go through here if they're not from that particular background, I went through in sixth grade. You know, I went to my school and I thought, *Oh, my school must have a golf course. I don't know how to play golf. I did not learn how to play golf.* [Laughs.] You know? I mean, you know, like—but, like, I didn't know about these things. You know, I thought, *Well, my friend—you know, her house is really big. I don't want to show her my house.* Like, I was sharing [my room] with my little brother. *Like, I can't bring her over!* And so I spent, like, my whole middle school, like, avoiding having people come into my house, you know. Or, *My mom doesn't drive a Benz. Like, I don't want her to drop me off.* But I did that in sixth grade. You know what I mean? And so if this has never been your experience, you come in, and this is frightening, you know?

And I remember I sat around with one of my roommates, who's from—well, she lives in the suburbs now, but she kind of grew up in inner city Chicago, and she went to, you know, an urban, all-black school. And I remember her saying things like, "I didn't know about boarding schools. Like, I didn't know this was a thing." And, like, all of these things, like, little things like that. Or "I didn't know about Sperry's and boat shoes," you know? And, like, little things. It's very small things that I was very familiar with, and I was, like, *Oh, I mean, of course. Like, boat shoes.* And I'm from a place with boats also, which is really interesting. [Laughs.]

But, you know, I remember having these conversations and thinking, *Wow! I am so much more prepared for this experience than my friends that haven't seen this before.* And so I think if you come into Dartmouth without that, this is new and frightening. And then throw on top of that having to be, you know, a student and scholar, and then throw on that having to figure out who you are as a person, and—you know, I mean, there's so many things that come into play.

And so I think some of the alienation has to do with class, and such a large amount of the black community is familiar with a lower class experience, even if it's not their particular immediate experience; it's family members and things like that. And I think—this is not necessarily particular to the black community but students of color—often those things are intertwined.

And so it's a long way of saying yes, I think the alienation thing has always happened. I think it has to do with just those intersections of race and class. And I don't think that Dartmouth is always aware of the ways in which it is subtly elite—

DONIN: Mmm.

WILLIAMS: —and the way that it kind of pervades this culture of elitism. And the part about elitism is that it's insular. That's the point. [Laughs.] You know? We only marry within our class, you know? We only socialize within our class. We have country clubs. They're exclusive. You have to pay to get in. Because we don't want everyone in it. You know what I mean? And so I think that at times Dartmouth can pretend as if it's not a part of that culture when it very much is. I mean, we are the Ivy League, you know. It's elite in the way it's stuck, you know.

DONIN: Well, that's the conflict, —

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DONIN: —is that they draw students in who meet the academic requirements —

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —but they're totally unprepared—

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —for the other aspects of life in this residential college—

WILLIAMS: Absolutely, absolutely.

DONIN: —where they're separated out.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm. And there's no reconciling of that when you get here. And so I think oftentimes that's the *real* source of these feelings of alienation and feelings of not being included when it comes to people of color, because sometimes they're from that background.

And the other thing is, if you find students of color that do not feel that alienation, they usually are of a class that identifies with this experience, you know. And it happens all the time. And so you have students that are from a higher class or, you know, a more affluent class, and they won't engage with the black community because it's a different experience. It's not black with a second level of class. It's kind of black, but I also—you know, *But my mom does have a Benz, and my house is really big, and I do understand this experience.* And so they'll often identify more with the major Dartmouth experience.

And so I think it's always been like that, and especially now that I'm more in touch with alumni and talking about what their experience is like—I mean, I'm very much on the tradition where you sit and listen to the old people [Laughs.] It has always been like that. And I think the community has always been a source of empowerment and engagement in which some of those, like, discrepancies have been answered. You know, there have been programs where people are doing things—I don't know, like—I can't think of anything exactly, but, you know, there are ways in which people are having those conversations and saying, "Well, hey, let's go out and"—you know, where people can feel, *Okay, I'm not the only one. Let's do this together, you know?*

And I think less so—there’s been less conversation around—I think—I think that race is not a thing anymore. You know, you’re not allowed to really talk about it in a way that it’s a valid excuse for being different, because “people aren’t inherently racist anymore, right?” And so then there’s no way to say, *Hey, this is different for me*, and so everyone is kind of thrown into the same experience without really thinking more critically about what those experiences are, because it’s not always about race, you know? Like I say, you do have situations in which class separates people even within race. And so now you can’t claim that race is a thing because there’s a student over there who’s very much comfortable here. You know what I mean?

And so I think, then—it becomes complicated, and I think people haven’t really been talking about the complicated parts in the past few years. You know, it’s very much a larger issue outside of Dartmouth, but it really happens in this kind of microcosm here, where you have such striations of class.

DONIN: And not just class. There’s so many ways for students to feel—

WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

DONIN: —different here.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I definitely decided to pigeonhole that. [Laughs.] Yes, there are a lot of different ways.

DONIN: Sexual orientation—

WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

DONIN: —religion—

WILLIAMS: Absolutely. There are so many. There are so many things. And so then you get the conversation about mainstream Dartmouth, you know? And a lot of people that identify with mainstream Dartmouth don’t like that. You know, they don’t want to be marginalized. They don’t want to think that they’re marginalizing other people.

I remember having this conversation with my friends in my sorority, and, you know, they were, like, “Yeah, I don’t understand why it’s just mainstream. It’s everyone’s Dartmouth.” And I was, like, “Well, it’s really not, though, you know? It’s not.” And as much as we—if we continue to talk about how it’s everyone’s Dartmouth instead of identifying how it’s not people are changing it, we’re never going to have a Dartmouth that everyone can identify with. But I think, you know, it’s tough. [Laughs.] It’s tough. When you’re a young person, also you don’t want to have those conversations. [Laughs.]

DONIN: Right.

WILLIAMS: “I’m tired.”

DONIN: Well, you know, it’s another challenge of feeling like you belong here along with everything else that you’re supposed to be doing: figuring out who you are, managing the academic demands, the social demands—

WILLIAMS: Figuring out what you want to do with your life. You know, there’s a lot of questions that happen in this time period that—you know, those other questions kind of fall—second nature to you. But, yeah, I mean, being insular happens on both sides, I think, you know? I think that the black community in a lot of ways is insular also, you know? I think there’s some people that identify with the experience that most people in the Afro-American Society identify with, and there’s some people that claim, you know, their blackness and *don’t* identify with that experience and don’t really have a place.

And that was one of the things that I had to struggle with from the beginning, was that, you know, I was now in a mainstream sorority, which was not really the experience of that many other black girls that were part of the Afro-American Society. And I had done very Dartmouth things already, because this was comfortable to me. And so I remember having this conversation about, “Well, you gotta go out and do things, you know?” [Laughs.] “You’ve got to experience things.” And I remember kind of taking freshmen along. “Hey, let’s go do”—you know.

But I had a different experience from the beginning, too. And I always felt like I should talk about it so people could know that they could also do it, you know? [Laughs.] Which, you know, as a recent alumna, you have very different—I thought that I was very important at the time—[Laughs.]—that I had a duty. But it is a different experience. It really is. And it's tough, you know? It's tough to do both.

DONIN: There's a piece of sort of self-preservation, too—

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —I think, that must play into it for those that come to Dartmouth who don't feel that they fit in—

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —and don't want to become part of the mainstream.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: They need to protect themselves.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

DONIN: Well, you were very lucky to find this group of women—

WILLIAMS: Yes.

DONIN: —that you did—

WILLIAMS: Yes.

DONIN: —who supported you—

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —all your way through—

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: —during your many challenges—

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DONIN: —that you had here.

WILLIAMS: No, they were wonderful, just so important. And I really always wished that other people had that experience, and I know that people *don't* have that experience. I think it's really easy to build frivolous friends because you're new. You don't know very much, you know? I don't know how that even happened, obviously. [Laughs.] I mean, my best friend I met during trips.

DONIN: Amazing.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, I decided that she was going to be my best friend. I also have a habit of doing that, is just deciding that people are going to be my friends. [Laughs.] But I sat beside her on the bus back from Moosilauke. She was on a different trip than I was. I think she did, like, cabin camping or something. Meh. [Laughs.] She's the one that I was saying is—you know, she's from the inner city of Chicago. Well, she's not from inner city of Chicago, but she went to school in that experience.

You know, I met her on a trip and I decided she was going to be my friend, and she's, like, a little black girl, and I was, like, "Oh, you're gonna be my friend. And it'll be, like, cool. And you're so cool, and you can dance. I'm gonna be like you. It's gonna be awesome," you know? [Laughs.] And we've been friends ever since.

DONIN: Great.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. I mean, we did have a fight junior year, but it had to do with me not being a very good friend and having many other things to think about. But, you know, commitment to things I think also happens at Dartmouth, and people aren't very good at that, either. I think that's the key to good relationships, beyond just friendships, and a lot of people don't do that, and so, you know, as far as having good friends—I mean, a lot of us were committed to being good friends, you know. And I think sometimes that's not the case.

DONIN: It doesn't happen.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

DONIN: Right.

WILLIAMS: One of my friends that I met kind of later on, my sophomore spring—she's Burmese. And her original group of friends—you know, they were friends with her, but it was a little bit more kind of tenuous, and she made friends kind of through the sorority as well, which is a different connection, and I think that when it started to be a little bit testy, those commitments to the friendship weren't there, and so she kind of came to our group a little bit more—you know, kind of our group of friends, because we had I guess a more solid sense of how we were going to go about being friends, and it was very deliberate, you know?

DONIN: Well, that sounds like more of the common—more commonly, that's the story that you hear about how your community changes.

WILLIAMS: Mm-hm.

DONIN: It alters.

WILLIAMS: Right.

DONIN: It expands and contracts—

WILLIAMS: Right. That's right.

DONIN: —over time.

WILLIAMS: And it really didn't. I think there weren't kind of internal conflicts with my friends until senior, like, winter. And boys came in then, which, you know, is always—

DONIN: A problem. [Chuckles.]

WILLIAMS: You know, like I said, it takes issues that are sort of small and exacerbates them to no end.

DONIN: Right. [Chuckles.]

WILLIAMS: But there were no changes. There were no changes. I mean, if there was any change, it was me kind of bringing myself into a smaller community. And that had a lot to do with where I felt I was being the most—I was effecting the most change, that I was really being a productive member of my community. And that's an important part for me. And so I felt like the ways that I was engaging with the larger Dartmouth community weren't effective. I wasn't doing anything. No one really cared or necessarily needed it, you know. And so I went into a community where I felt comfortable, that had uplifted me, so that I could make sure that I was being a productive member of society.

But it was very much a narrowing, which, you know, I think is not necessarily how you want things to go. [Laughs.] You kind of wish—you kind of want to have a broader base by the time you leave, not a smaller one. [Laughs.]

But also when I was depressed, I started cutting a lot of the unnecessary things, you know.

DONIN: That's important.

WILLIAMS: And I was really only having—by that point, I only had interactions that I thought were meaningful.

DONIN: Right.

WILLIAMS: And that was one of the reasons I ended up dropping out of my sorority and de-pledging, because that was, like, *This is a waste of my time.* [Laughs.] *This is expensive, and it's a waste of my time, and I don't have to do this, and I feel so much pressure to kind of make a situation work that doesn't have to work because I have a community. I have a group of friends. I don't need this experience, because it's not positive.*

But I stayed close to, you know, the girls in the house that I was close with, my little and her friends, and my friends, but we don't need this. A lot of time, there's a lot of unnecessary things happening also.

DONIN: Well, less is better.

WILLIAMS: Less is better. Less is better. And you can maintain less.  
[Laughs.]

DONIN: Okay, Shan. I think we're done.

WILLIAMS: All right!

DONIN: This was great.

WILLIAMS: I talked a lot! [Laughs.]

**[End of interview.]**