Oral History of Kamal Al Mansour

Interviewed by:
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Weber: I'm Marc Weber of the Computer History Museum. I'm here on July 13th, 2022 with Charlton McIlwain, a historian and author of *Black Software,* to interview Kamal Al Mansour, a key pioneer of digital Afrocentric content, and an artist, and author. Thank you so much for doing this.

Al Mansour: Absolutely.

McIlwain: Absolutely.

McIlwain: All right, thank you, as well. Again Kamal, we've had many of these conversations, but we're going to take it from the top and start at the beginning again, and maybe start with just telling us your full name, and then when were you born, and where were you born?

Al Mansour: Sure. My full name, Kamal Amir Masiah Al Mansour. I was born in Los Angeles, California. You didn't ask for the date, which is a good thing. Went to school in California, primarily. Finished UCLA, undergrad, finished UC Hastings College of Law[1], and now I'm residing in Hampton, Virginia.

McIlwain: Excellent. So Kamal, can you tell me a little bit about your family growing up, and so your father, your mother, siblings? Who were they? What were they to you in terms of early influences? Tell us a little bit about who you grew up with.

Al Mansour: Sure. Grew up in a household with a mother, and father, a sister. My father was born in New Orleans, Louisiana a very long time ago. Passed when I was 13, actually, the summer before starting high school. My mom was born in Birmingham, Alabama, schoolteacher, educator, counselor for 39 years, just short of 40 years. She left Birmingham actually, prior to the Civil Rights Movement in the early 50s, maybe 1950, 1951. She was a major influence in my life. I had to grow up early because [of] my father passing, so with my mom being an educator, you had no choice but to use proper diction, proper language, proper grammar, often corrected. Education was important. Always do your best and be your best. You don't have to get straight As long as you did your best. But if you did your best, you got straight As. So major influence growing up. Sister, two years older, received her PhD, a few masters, and as I mentioned, I'm undergrad at UCLA and finished law school. So that was the upbringing. I was an artist from five years old, and what was interesting, I recall my father drawing something, and I drew something, and his was better. I think I cried for two hours, and from that point on, not so much in terms of competition, but just focused on drawing and wanting to do my best being an artist, playing sports, and just living a nice, healthy, family-oriented lifestyle.

Weber: And what I'm curious about, the artist at five. Did that come from your father and seeing other artistic work that he did? Or was that something you just sort of happened upon that was in your DNA so to speak?

Al Mansour: I'm convinced it's genetics because people look at my work now, and they think it's a photograph, and I say, "Well, I've been drawing for over 55 years. I should be fairly decent at this point,"

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but it's a natural talent. Interesting story. My mom started teaching in '52, met a woman named <u>Lovie</u> Honeywood from Jackson, Mississippi. Her daughter Varnette Honeywood, if you recall the old Bill Cosby Show from the 80s, all of that artwork on the wall was Varnette Honeywood, and so I knew Varnette from the time I was five, six years old. She was the only artist because everyone else was either educator or professional, something like that. But she was a huge influence and it was just something that I was drawn to because it was natural for me.

Weber: Incredible, and where in Los Angeles did you live?

Al Mansour: I grew up in an area-- well, for quite a number of years it was designated a historical area. Oftentimes, they'd designate certain areas in different cities with historical reference, and so this area was called Lafayette Square. It was not too far from Hancock Park, but it was predominantly African American but it wasn't always that way. Up the street was a home where Joe Lewis lived in the 40s. Across the street, Leo Branton, Jr., a prominent civil rights attorney who was actually the mentor to Johnnie Cochran. He was the reason I went to law school. Cussed me out in the middle of the street, asking me why I was going to be an artist, I would never make money, go to law school. But anyway, so Leo was across the street. Next to him, Vano Spencer, Third Circuit Court of Appeals. Down the street, a few actors. Around the corner, Walt Hazzard, coach from UCLA, so interesting neighborhood. Kind of tucked in, away from everything. Of course, like many areas, you step out, and then it's LA in its entirety, but grew up in somewhat of an enclave, not so much protected, but allowed to grow, and expand, and become a-- evolve and develop my talents and different skills. So it was a nice area to grow up in.

McIlwain: It sounds safe to say that yours was a neighborhood where there was a lot of social capital, and you had a lot of folks to sort of look up to, and not so much idolize, but have an image of what success could be and that success was possible in whatever you pursued.

Al Mansour: Yeah, and I appreciate, even to this day. I mean, it's foundational, and I have three sons, and oftentimes, we get into conversations about, as parents, you set the bar, but I try to influence them there is no bar. You can go as high and climb as high as you want, and if you choose to do so, then there is no bar. There is no ceiling. It's infinite. So you grow as far as your mind will take you and your heart.

McIlwain: Were there times when there were, I don't know, intrusions in this enclave, in particular around the racial politics? Were there moments where the bubble burst, either from encroachment outside or moments inside where conflict of some kind arose? Or was it pretty steady in terms of what was happening and the normalcy of what was?

Al Mansour: Sure. Interesting story. Actually, months before my father passed, he was with Union Pacific Railroad. In those days, you had Southern Pacific, Union Pacific. You had individual railroad companies, just like you have airlines now, different airlines, and there was the onslaught of Amtrak coming, which was going to consolidate passenger trains, and my father was protesting that and was investigated by the FBI, and I remember to this day, I couldn't really comprehend then why two white men in grey suits were talking to my father sternly outside of our home, and so that's intrusion in some ways, from external forces or outside events. Rodney King was blocks away or at least the aftermath of Rodney King's episode was blocks away. Adams and Crenshaw, I recall driving home from a friend's house, and it was gas stations

bursting into flames, literally minutes from the house, so there was no direct intrusion so to speak, but the surrounding area sustained the impact of racial disharmony.

McIlwain: What year was it you then went to UCLA for college and was your initial idea to pursue art when you went to school?

Al Mansour: Yes, and like I said, I started school as an art major, had the encounter with Leo, and just if you don't know, Leo Branton represented Angela Davis, represented Richard Pryor, handled the Jimi Hendrix estate, and [I] never knew why there was always, at least once or twice a year, black limos, and crowds in his house, but it was Rosa Parks visiting twice a year. She would always visit Leo at least twice a year. But it was an encounter. I was putting out the trash. Leo just asked me, "You should be about 18, 19 now. What are you majoring in?" I said art. Shook his head. The cussing ensued and so diverted two years in, switched to political science, minor in African American Studies. Finished UCLA in '81. Interesting story. Jackie Joyner-Kersee, wasn't Kersee then, was a fellow student. Flo-Jo was in several of my classes. Many prominent athletes were at UCLA then, Ken Easley, Rod Foster, a number. But it was one of the pivotal points in education, if you will, and my life actually because just meeting certain professors, Richard Yarborough, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Mazisi Kunene, the mind just opened. It was, in many ways, a precursor to AfroLink because it was those seeds that were being planted during my days at UCLA, ironically, Black Studies in Campbell Hall. I can't remember the Panther who was shot, Richard Bunche Hall a few steps away and just surrounded by just an incubator of black thought, black culture, black creativity.

McIlwain: Was there a moment during that time after you had switched majors and experienced all this, was there a kind of reconciliation in your mind about your move away from your artistic pursuits? Was there some way these started to gel? What was the tension, if there still existed at that moment, between those two aspirations?

Al Mansour: In some ways, it was another iteration of myself. So people always talk about two sides of the brain, one creative, one intellectual or analytical. I never gave much thought to it, but then it opened up. The theory of the two sides, it opened up the other side. So it allowed me to absorb data, information, content that I probably would not have otherwise. I did, with Beverly Robinson, study black theater, and met Maidie Norman, and they were attributes of the creative side that was poking around in theater and that creative aspect. But it was, I'm not going to say a complete turnoff, but it was just a shift or a pivot that allowed me to take another path as part of the ongoing journey, so it was, I'm not going to say natural, but it was interesting. It allowed me to really pique a lot of intellectual curiosity. Vocabulary changed. It was, I think, a natural pivot, but a welcomed one as well.

Weber: So then Hastings Law School, was there a reason for the choice of that school in particular or happened to be convenient, knowing that you wanted to pursue law?

Al Mansour: Well, Harvard Law said, we'd love to have you. They actually didn't. There were many top schools that I probably chose not to apply. I wasn't quite sure if law was the path. So going to Harvard

Law, going to Yale, top law schools, didn't really see it as an idea or a concept because I still wasn't certain. I was actually doing this because of ideas planted. So Hastings being convenient, part of the UC system, not too far from home, a good school, I think it was ranked 11 in the nation at the time. So still a good school but would allow me certain flexibility. So that was probably a lot of the choice.

McIlwain: Gotcha. What did you decide to, after first year or so, focus on? In terms of areas of the law, what piqued your interest and what did you decide to pursue?

Al Mansour: I saw intellectual property as interesting. Again, you had many fellow students there who knew they wanted to prosecute, who knew they wanted to defend, who knew they wanted to work for government and different agencies. So they were able to curate a path. Whereas it was more just intellectual curiosity for me, just things that I found individually appealing. Oil and gas law I found very intriguing. But it was really intellectual property, just the non-tangible I thought was very interesting. So I pursued courses in that direction.

McIlwain: And is this the, I think we've talked about this before, the moment you first started to kind of encounter computing technology of some kind? And I think we've talked to a story about your opportunity to help a friend or colleague around IP issues that he was having while you were in law school. Tell us a little bit about that moment of starting to interact with computing technology in some way.

Al Mansour: Sure. Working with other students, and there were a few whose parents who were at law firms, black actually, and used computers, LexisNexis. So was dabbling around, just being introduced to computers as basically a tool, and I was proficient in contract law, and out of the blue, I had a friend, Vincent Hollier, who invented Real Time. He invented laser tag, and the business around that was called Real Time, and he called and said, "When's the next time you're going to be in LA? I have an issue. I need your help." I said, "Well, I'm second year." He said, "But I need help. Contracts, anything you can do to kind of help me with what I'm doing," and I had other students, a mentor in contracts, who was specializing in contracts and different things. So when I went to LA, I chatted with my friend, and he did a lot of 3D modeling and different concepts using computers, and ran into an issue with the theft, ironically enough, of his intellectual property. So he engaged me, and I surrounded or engaged other folks to kind of build a team to deal with the federal aspect, to try to stop the bleeding of the infringement and do something with that. He had another deal going with a Japanese company to build Real Time in Japan. So I had another friend who specialized in Japanese litigation to help with that, and in the meantime, I was writing license agreements to-- and of course, not an attorney yet, still a student, but writing license agreements to help him sort of create structure and framework to his business. So that was my exposure to technology, and really, the creativity of how technology could be used. So I found it extremely interesting.

McIlwain: So that aspect of it, the computing aspect, the creativity aspect started to pique your interest alongside the legal aspects of the IP issues, contract issues that you were working with as well.

Al Mansour: Absolutely, and it helped me understand that it was you didn't have to be confined to one thing. Not that it's a bad thing or a good thing. But that just leave the mind opened, and build skills, and build expertise to use your instincts to apply to different scenarios. There was a fellow student who became the editor of Running Magazine. He ran marathons. He was a law student but chose that path.

Another student went on to produce reggae. So I started seeing students who used law school as foundational, a broad education, specific insights, but still allowed certain aspects of themselves to pursue other endeavors. So it really opened a window for me.

Weber: As an artist, were you at all attracted to computers for artistic purposes? Or was that even part of the computers you were exposed to?

Al Mansour: At that time, not yet. When I started AfroLink, absolutely. The artist kicked in 1,000%. But during that time, I didn't connect that dot.

McIlwain: And sort of similarly, when you were at Hastings and doing your work there, did you have any occasion to sort of bump up against any of what was happening in kind of the burgeoning tech scene in the Bay Area, Silicon Valley area, or was that a different community than what you were immersed in at that particular moment?

Al Mansour: At that time, it was a different community. The focus was different. It was actually not too long, not too much later, actually, a year after I finished Hastings, where the understanding of where Silicon Valley was, Park, Palo Alto Research Center, started to bubble into conversations. Ashton Tate started to bubble into conversations. So it's ironic being in the Bay Area, but not really having any insight into what was going on in Silicon Valley because it was new then. I mean, HP. You had certain companies that were coming up, IBM in New York, but it didn't trickle into my thought process when I was at Hastings.

McIlwain: So move onto the next thing. The beginning of your career was-- where did you go right after law school? Your first job, was it at JPL?

Al Mansour: It was at JPL, actually, yes. Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena. It was an interesting experience, very different from law school. I mean, you're carrying to a job, your school experience, not knowing what a job is yet, or at least I didn't. It was interesting at the time because Reagan was president. His focus was SDI, the Space Defense Initiative. You had shuttles going into space. You had unmanned space exploration. You had the Department of Energy. You had Caltech creating things. Everything was new. It was a very pioneer centric experience at the time. The computers were much more powerful then because everything was more so a server. The PC was just coming onto line as far as a tool. But if you look at the cost of software in those days, it was astronomical for, and the processor size. Modem size was-- a 300 baud modem, we thought was lightning speed in those days. The mouse was not yet a peripheral. So it was very early days and a lot of insight into what technology could become. It was unclear in those days. It was mostly for specific endeavors, government focused. Many of the companies were focused on technology they could transfer because that was my job, negotiating technology transfers, negotiating software license agreements, writing them from scratch, which I had already kind of knew that. But it was early days and very interesting in those days.

McIlwain: So you talk a little bit more about how-- you talk about Reagan and his agenda. How did that impact sort of your everyday in terms of what it was that you were working on, what you got tasked to work on? Did you have very much freedom to sort of pick and choose what you're working on, or it was

pretty tightly controlled in terms of agenda coming down from the White House, and through particular areas of government, and down to your particular work? How was that sort of day-to-day impact?

Al Mansour: Sure. It was very tightly regulated. It was as though you were part of the government. There was not really the opportunity for a lot of free thought. It was, here's the gig, here's the job, and do this job, don't really think, just do it. The irony in that is that if it's something new, and something different, you had to think about it, but the focus was to just do the work, and it was all day, every day. It was challenging in many ways because part of me says, you're working for essentially, a government agency, or at least a subcontractor or contractor to the government. They say it's non-manned space exploration, but yet, you're negotiating license agreements, technology transfers to build the technology to control arms, to control missiles and bombs around the world. So I was conflicted, to be honest with you. My upbringing, my roots, my foundation, it was challenging. I'm doing the job. It's the job. I'm earning money. It's somewhat challenging, but it was more of a challenge just to go to a job where I disagreed with the endeavors of the job. So it was a conflict for me and very challenging.

McIlwain: And what were your colleagues like there, both in terms of sort of demographically, but also kind of in this line of what you talked about? Were there folks that just accepted reality as it was, come to the work, do the work, do the job, don't question? What was sort of the environment like with your counterparts? Did that help to sort of feed the tension you felt with what it was that you were tasked to do and so forth?

Al Mansour: I'm trying to choose my words very carefully here. But there's a certain aspect of indoctrination when you work for certain positions. Let's just say I was an outlier, being, one, the only African American. One other JD besides myself, black, much older, one other black person doing a much different job, at least on the same floor. But it was one of those things, just like the old South where you didn't have conversation because it would convey a message that you were discussing things that had nothing to do with work. So it was somewhat old school, much of a throwback, so just the atmosphere, the culture of the job was one that it was clear I did not fit in that culture. Did they benefit from my knowledge, at least from certain expertise? Maybe. I think in those days, a lot of jobs were check the box, so I think it was a check the box for them. So it was you know.

McIlwain: I hear ya, and then when did you start to mentally and more professionally start to pivot away from and out of JPL? What sparked that and how did you start to make that shift?

Al Mansour: One thing that I may not have shared when we chatted earlier, at least for your book, I met a cousin that I didn't know I had. One of my aunts, older aunts married a Jamaican, and he had a son who actually worked in tech in Germany, and then moved to Los Angeles. He was married to a woman from Ghana whose father was an ambassador under Kwame Nkrumah's government, and we connected in many ways, from a tech aspect primarily, and it was visiting him, and hanging out with him, becoming fast friends, and very close that another iteration of myself emerged, and that really, along with what I learned at UCLA, again another dot connected, understanding more about Africa, understanding more about the Caribbean, and at least realizing that there was much more information that people like me and others needed because if not for my direct connection with my cousin and his wife, I probably wouldn't

have received a lot of information about Africa, authors, things like that, and it was at that time that I started, as you recall, building notebooks of data and information about Africa, the Caribbean. Just a lot of conversations we would have, I'd write down author's names, drill into the different authors, drill into different thinkers. So in a lot of ways that gave me the relief, at least the safe harbor that I needed coming from Pasadena every day. So essentially traveling, if you will, between two galaxies, and it provided me really what I needed emotionally, intellectually at that time.

McIlwain: So it's in this transition time and moment where CPTime Online emerges. Can you tell us the story of how that initially begins in that particular time?

Al Mansour: Sure, and you're right, CPTime began around that time, and it was early because we were again, having a lot of conversations, discussing a lot of things, and the data was piling up, and we would often talk about the necessity for others to have this information, and so again, I was probably always an intrapreneur. I would use the gig, if you will, to help me gain insight to certain things that I might not have otherwise. So understanding modems, understanding data transmission, understanding how data shared was what I gathered from jobs, and it was, you know, JPL and then others, Candle[ph?] Corporation and then GTE, Government Systems Division. It was those jobs that sort of turned on and opened the door to understanding of what bulletin board systems were, and how data was transmitted from point A to point B, and how people could access this data. So it was at that point that again, more dots started connecting, becoming more Afrocentric, building a repository of data, and then understanding that there were platforms there that allowed me to share data. So it was those were the early days of when CPTime began.

McIlwain: And I don't think I've asked this question before, but one of the things that was striking about CPTime, at least for me, was the artwork that went into when you registered the company and so forth. Can you say a little bit about that? I remember the-- I meant to bring it up, pull it up on my computer, but the faces of people that were distinctly African, the strong sort of images, the hair, just everything that connoted this kind of centrality of Africa and blackness and so forth. Tell us a little bit about, I guess, the legal side, the artistic side, as that's coming together in something as mundane as registering the name of the company, and then as you start to build the content for what became CPT or CPTime Online?

Al Mansour: Yeah. Again, what's interesting is sometimes we realize it. Sometimes we don't. We're actually building our own repository, our own dataset, our own toolset as we matriculate through life, if you will. So the law school experience, the job experience gave me the insight to how intellectual property works, registering the name CPTime and making it a registered trademark. I didn't want to fall victim to the stereotype that CPTime always conveyed the message of black people being late. You show up for something an hour late, 30 minutes late, 20 minutes late. Oh, you're on CPTime. Okay, colored people's time. So I flipped the script on that and said, well, no. It's time for people of color to get online. It's time for people of color to have access to data. It's time for people of color to be connected through technology. So it was my spin on a stereotype that was familiar. But conveying it as a message of connectivity, of timeliness, and so I thought it was fitting to register that name and insert a different meaning or influence a different meaning of what that meant. So I registered that trademark. What's interesting about CPTime, I expanded that to the clipart, which I think you're talking about. The way that started is in '85, I bought my first Mac, my first computer, and the person I was with was into desktop publishing. So she would get gigs

from soul food restaurants, and beauty salons, and beauty shops, and beauty supply stores, and people who were opening shops because Afrocentricity was coming online, if you will, so different people were opening shops, and needing brochures, needing catalogs, needing leaflets, and so I was creating art for these things, creating art for these different businesses, and just like with the data I collected, next thing I turned around, I have 100 images that I had created, and so later when AfroLink became more of a business, I said, wait a second. This is clipart, and so again, expanding the name, CPTime Clipart, and then ultimately ending up with over 300 images, and selling them as clipart, and now my clipart is appearing in magazines and even a UCLA publication for the clip art. So that's kind of the genesis of how CPTime started and how I expanded the platform for CPTime from the bulletin board to CPTime Clipart.

McIlwain: Was there a market in LA? You talked about UCLA. Was there a broader market before you left California that was taken advantage of in buying the clipart that you were selling?

Al Mansour: At that time, well, the framework was there. Were there customers at that time? Not really. The framework was there. I was selling images through the work that I was creating but not as clip art. It was later when I relocated to the East Coast, started working for GTE, Government Systems Division, and the night that I shared before, when I was scanning channels and on PBS, saw a Princeton professor sharing a software program called Culture, and it was interactive. There was animation. There were these different things going on the computer screen and I was absolutely fascinated for many different reasons. One, because I'd never seen it before. But more so than that because I said, well, you're calling it Culture, but you're showing Michelangelo. You're showing DaVinci. You're showing all of these. You're showing Greece, and the Greeks, and the Colosseum, but I'm not seeing pyramids. I'm not seeing the Sphinx. I'm not seeing anything else in the world that was the precursor to what you have in your software program, which was the root, for me, of culture. So it was that night that I said, I've got to do something and started playing around on the computer. I created a button on a page, and I clicked the button, and there was a sound, and there was a little flash, and I'm like, and I had data. I had clipart, and it was a come-to-Jesus moment, and my imagination started going levels, and levels, and levels, and levels, and I said, okay, I see this. I see it, and it was at that moment, and for the next few nights. I mean, I got very little sleep, and created what was then called Mac Africa, believe it or not, and I still have the storyboards. I still have the notes. But the first product I labeled in the storyboard Mac Africa and I just started working. I didn't know what I was doing, how I was doing it. Ironically enough, it was one of those moments. If you look back at JPL, don't think. Just do it. So the indoctrination kicked in. I wasn't thinking. I was just doing, and things were emerging, and I started packaging, and thinking, and putting everything together. There were building blocks that were forming and then I said no, it's not Mac Africa. It's I'm providing an insight to Africa. Okay, I'll call it Africa Insight. That was the first product. I said, Okay, CPTime. okay, let's call the clip art CPTime Clipart, Volume One, and I needed something on history, I said, so I've got to talk about who we are' I said, oh, my gosh, I'll call it Who We Are, and I just focused on building what I thought was software. There was no playbook. There was no reference. There was no Google. There was no repository or resource to look at, no reference, nothing in an encyclopedia. I just started creating, and that's when the artist kicked in, and welcomed the intellectual side, and everything just started working together.

McIlwain: And what tools were you using? You had your Mac. Did you have to get other equipment, hardware, or peripherals, et cetera, to do the work that you were doing, and was that a kind of iterative

thing? Were you sort of doing something and jumped up and realized, oh, I've got to go get this, and then what were those few days like in terms of the back and forth?

Al Mansour: The first thing I needed was a hard drive or I needed to expand my hard drive. I had quickly run out of capacity. So that was the first thing I did was expand my hard drive. The next thing was it wasn't quite obvious, but it seemed as though the Mac Plus I had was extremely slow. I didn't know it was slow, but it felt slow, and then Apple announced a new Mac, a Mac SE, I think, Special Edition, or Mac SE, so went out. Got a new Mac. Expand the hard drive and it was actually a removable hard drive. So it was almost like these large discs. I can't remember the name. I still have those too. So I was able to swap out almost like blades if you will, the hard drive. Next thing you know, it was just stacking up. The amount of data was stacking up. Ironically enough, the Mac came with a program called HyperCard, very similar to, or I guess the more professional iteration was from Adobe. But HyperCard was there. It was free. It came with the Mac. So the real investment was a new computer, more hard drive capacity, and then later, I was able to configure the Mac SE which was black and white to run an external screen. So I later expanded to a color screen. Used the Mac. It had seemingly endless hard drive capacity and just started creating.

Weber: The first ones were on floppy or CD-ROM only?

Al Mansour: CD-ROM I don't believe was out at that time, at least not on a mass scale. So it was a three-and-a-half-inch disk. So if you can imagine, for Africa Insight, it took three disks, and so I had to create an install API, so that you can install one disc, and then install a second disc, install the third disc, and then it would copy the full program to your hard drive. The clipart was able to fit on one three and-a-half inch, and what's also interesting, it was only Mac in those days. I didn't understand market dynamics, things like that. So it was later on that I converted everything to MS-DOS, and then of course, released things on five and a quarter inch disk, floppy disk. So yes, it was a three and-a-half. No CD yet. CD would come later.

Weber: Oh, you're right. It was still very experimental at that point.

Al Mansour: Yes.

Weber: So you were creating HyperCard stacks on the disk, and the art was probably just image files?

Al Mansour: Right. The clipart were image files. The interactive programs were HyperCard stacks, Africa Insight and Who We Are, and what's interesting, you don't realize while you're doing things that you're building a business, or at least I didn't think of it in terms, okay, I'm building a business. Business plan, this, packaging, marketing, didn't think about those things. Would just create and do it as I thought I needed it. So I said, okay, I have products, I guess I got to figure out how to package the products. So now packaging came in. I said, when software sold, it needs a license. They were essentially shrink wrap licenses. So I had to create a license. I didn't know much about marketing. So I wrote a news release, sent out a news release. Emerge Magazine, which was a new magazine in those days, wrote a piece on the software. They showed a map of Africa, and I think one other image, and a colleague of yours, Charlton, I'm sure, Dr. Molefi K. Asante read the article and called out of the clear blue sky, and it was a

very short conversation. He said, "I like what you're doing. What's ready?" and I said, "Oh, I have Africa Insight ready. I have clipart. I'll have Who We Are in a minute." "How much?" So I was still dabbling with pricing. Wasn't quite clear. So I threw out prices. He said, "Okay, where can I send a check?" Sent the check. He said, "Okay, keep up the good work." End of conversation. Very first customer, and from there, I realized, okay, I'm in a business. I'm creating software, and so I started putting certain frameworks in place for being in business, started pursuing other PR opportunities, wasn't doing any advertising. The PR was essentially enough from Emerge, to Black Enterprise, to MacWEEK, Macworld, just everything. I guess creating something new, something that didn't exist, it sort of marketed itself. So it was interesting.

McIlwain: I might want to go back to a couple of questions I missed in this sort of timeline to pick up on. One is your move from California to Boston, and that was a result of both your new job, but also that you had gotten married in the interim, in that time period at some point.

Al Mansour: Right. My wife at the time actually got a job at Lotus development in Cambridge, and I had a job at GTE, Government Systems Division. What was interesting about that job was the work, so at least the exposure to certain things. Again, the exposure. I was working on a project for pretty much my entire tenure there, which was short, called Red Ryder, and Red Ryder was a US Air Force technology that was testing GPS, government positioning satellites. Again, more satellites, and the gig was to negotiate a contract between the US Air Force, GTE, and Trailways, and Greyhound buses, so that those bus services could leverage GPS technology. Great exposure, great gig, Boston, so again, interesting climate. Interesting gig. You're one of very few in the space and that was the other thing I noticed probably later on about being black and being in tech. In those days, you were far and few between. I don't recall, maybe other than an admin, seeing any other black people, at least in that division. It was interesting. Again, finding other things to do. There was an African American book club. There was a movement in those days to rename-- I lived in Roxbury, to rename Roxbury Mandela. So it was again, the social surroundings, the social aspect, and then you have the job aspect. So you're essentially migrating between two distinct societies, two distinct experiences. You're almost bidialectal. You're speaking one language in one environment, and then you speak a different dialect or a different way in a different environment, and later on, you learn about authenticity, and things like that. So was I being authentic? I don't know. Again, AfroLink became the beacon, and became a driving force, which allowed me to, I guess, achieve my authenticity. But it was an interesting transition. Again, life's interesting. You're consistently, you're constantly going through a transformation. If you allow the transformation to take place, it can really inspire a nice journey.

McIlwain: And another kind of a past question to sort of fill in. Part of this transformation, at some point, was your embrace of Islam. Is that correct? Did that happen at some point while you're still in LA, or even earlier, or at what point was this transformation?

Al Mansour: It probably started my last year in law school. I had a close friend and mentor who had transitioned to Islam, if you can call it a transition, or converted to Islam, and that was also an aspect that inspired the journey. It was again, I mean, when you learn about yourself, you realize that just like a diamond, there are facets. Some people use the onion skin analogy, but onions make you cry if they're not cold, and you don't have a sharp blade when you cut them. So I use the diamond analogy. If you're open, and you look at the facets of the diamond, you find out different aspects of what the diamond looks

like, and if you accept that the diamond allows light in and transforms light going out. There are prisms within a diamond, so it's really learning more about myself, finding out more about who I am, allowing more of myself to reveal who I am, and so that was an interesting part of self-discovery, that, Afrocentricity, the climate of the time, the lack of unity, connectivity, and so really embracing the opportunity that AfroLink had at the moment, it was, in many ways, more than just software. It was more than technology. It was something that was necessary, I think.

McIlwain: So at what point then, picking back up with AfroLink, does AfroLink become the main thing, that you're done with GTE, and AfroLink becomes your fulltime gig?

Al Mansour: When I left GTE, it was also just being in Boston. It's a nice place to visit. I still think it's a nice place to visit. But it was just living in Boston, my wife at the time being into code, and just looking for a different opportunity. So for her she left Lotus and went to Microsoft in Bellevue, Washington, and I decided to do AfroLink fulltime, and so in those days, you could get a full reloc package. So we were relocated to Washington State. She was working at Microsoft and I had the freedom now to do AfroLink fulltime. So now a second volume, a third volume of the clipart. Not just Africa Insight, but Caribbean insight, Afro-American insight, a program about Islam, learning what Islam is. Schools started becoming more interested in the software. So I wanted to do something, having been my first son was born in Seattle. I sent out a press release, AfroLink moved to Washington State, expands its products. Then Black Enterprise picked up on that. Then the next thing I know, Seattle Times, and there was the business editor who did a lot of things for Microsoft and others became intrigued with AfroLink, and I think it was either a full page or a half page in the business section of the Seattle Times, and then yet another snowball for AfroLink. More schools interested, and people were saying, well, what do you have for K through six, a lot of what you have is more so for high school, college. So then I created a program called Pride and Purpose, a program about self-esteem for African American youth, for K through six. So it was a time where-- you asked the question earlier about art, the full artist, the full creative Kamal kicked in. It was like the mind opened up, and I just started creating, and every day, I would just say, I love creating. It was sort of a mantra. Later on however, because it was so new, and many people were buying computers for the first time because of AfroLink, and again, learning business, I had to then divert or pivot to providing tech support. So that became another aspect of being in business, providing tech support to people who found it challenging to install software, understanding what peripherals they needed, needing hard drive space, needing this, needing that, and then it became so much of a business, there were days when I would just say I just want to create, I just want to create. I also transitioned into expanding to the PC platform, and so that brought in the audience, and so it was an all-day, everyday experience.

McIlwain: It was all you, right. You didn't have employees.

Al Mansour: In those days, I didn't have employees. It was maybe a couple years later that I engaged some interns and engaged someone to handle marketing and PR, and it was later when I just couldn't do it all that I needed to engage people.

McIlwain: We've talked about this a little bit before. Kind of fast forwarding a bit. AfroLink is successful commercially. You're diversifying the products and services you're offering.

At what point did you start to sort of think that that wasn't the direction that you wanted to continue to go in?

Al Mansour: What was interesting is that-- and again, was it politics? I think one of the things I've always been, I guess a friend would call it-- the same friend Vincent Hollier, who developed laser tag would often use military references. So it was situational awareness. So I always maintain a certain level of situational awareness. If you look at the transition from say JPL, the early days, and then the height of AfroLink, Clinton is now president. Homelessness was becoming a thing in America. Technology was taking off. Netscape was the browser in those days. But it was early because the web had not yet been fully understood or realized. AOL was the email platform of choice. So I'm aware that there's certain dynamics going on. The economy, certain things are going on. The crime bill that Biden and Clinton had implemented. Crack cocaine becoming an epidemic. I mean, there's so many things that are going on at the same time and you're still trying to run a business. You're still trying to be creative. You're still trying to develop, but outside your door as life is raging, and so I say that to say, at the same time, the focal point of people, the demands of life, certain interests are shifting as well. So the economy was unique, in the sense that do people want to spend $60, $70, $80 for software? There's inferences that the web is coming. People didn't know what that was. But people are thinking and being told that they can get access to information for free because the internet is here. So now information will be free. Information will be widely available. I still have customers, especially schools, who had put in budget for software three years earlier. They're just now getting budget to buy software. I'm trying to figure out where the market is headed. But yet, my commitment is to still service customers. I had several buyout offers. One of them Davidson and Associates, a large CD-ROM publisher. This is where the social aspect shouldn't overtake business. So I'm thinking well, no, I need to stay committed to my audience, my base. I need to continue providing them software. They're the ones that got me here, so I need to be committed to them. But yet, business, technology is expanding rapidly and taking off, and so here was a time where I didn't pivot fast enough. The next thing I wake up, CD-ROM publishing is a dying business, and it wasn't just me. It was all CD-ROM publishers because again, you're offering data that's, for the most part, stagnant because you provide just like a book. You provide the CD. Although you can provide updates, the internet, and what was soon to become the internet was real time. Data could be updated instantly, and so I didn't pivot fast enough, and like others, it was time to transition. I had a very good friend who was a PhD in marketing, and I think he was teaching at Howard at the time, and he said, "Don't be ashamed. Don't beat yourself up. There are many great minds that have to go back to the drawing board," and I had another friend from AfroLink days, a Nigerian engineer, I think at Dupont, and he said, "No matter what happens, AfroLink was the first. AfroLink made an impact," and he too said, "If you have to go back to the drawing board, go back to the drawing board." So that's what I did. I dusted off my resume and joined the legal department of a major investment firm in Los Angeles and started planning my next endeavor.

McIlwain: That moment, maybe you can talk a little bit more even beyond sort of yourself and AfroLink, but you're distributing the via BBS early on, and CD ROM is how things are getting packaged, and there seems to be a transitional moment, as you're saying, not just for you, but for a sizable part of folks who were into technology in that early period, that seem to-- if you look back in the history, seem to fall off right around that time '94, '95, '96, and I mean, can you just say a little bit more about how disruptive that moment was in terms of the web coming online, and that become much more part of people's everyday experiences and so forth, and what kind of disruption that was for tech creators and business folks at the time who were early pioneers, and sort of first adopters in a business sense in this timeframe?

Al Mansour: Sure, I mean, it was hugely disruptive in many ways because again, you're talking about an industry that was providing CD-ROM drives, that was publishing CD-ROMs to a market that was shifting to data transmission, and again, I'm trying to think how fast was a modem then. Maybe 1,600 baud[2]. We're talking gigabit speed now. So we're talking almost chiseling on stone and rolling a message down the road versus data being transitioned in nanoseconds. So I mean, it was disruptive because, one, you're talking about manufacturing having to shift to machines that were more data transmission ready with cards that could connect to telephone lines. You're talking about telephone companies. Cable companies didn't know. AT&T was becoming. The bells were breaking up, and AT&T saw fiber optic, but they didn't know where that was headed for the most part. So there were many attributes. Ted Turner, was he selling CNN, and Cable News Network, and headline news during those days? So the cable companies, telephone companies, they're trying to understand where technology is headed and trying to understand will cable be better than fiber optic. What does this mean for the computer industry? Computers now have to be designed so that they have cards that you can swap out. The browser, you need some way to navigate a screen. It can't just be like a bulletin board, typing in cryptic words to connect to something through choices, one, two, three, four, five, six to get to certain data topics. So Marc Andreessen is trying to build Netscape with what he thought was a browser. Microsoft was still going through antitrust, was always seemingly going through antitrust. Steve Jobs. I can't remember. The guy from Pepsi had taken over Apple. Steve Jobs was still trying to figure out NeXT computing. Next we have the premier issue of NEXT Magazine with Steve Jobs on the cover when he was pushing that out. So you had all these different dynamics. it was almost as though it was a restart, a reboot of tech because everyone is now pivoting. Everyone is shifting and trying to shift as fast as possible, but still not crystal clear on what they're shifting to. Am I committing to fiber? If I'm committed to fiber, great. What computer technology will connect? How fast will it connect? I'm building a browser. What's the data behind the browser? What will people browse? What are they looking for online? What becomes the core content that will capture an audience? I put information online for free. How do I monetize it? So it was a reboot for everyone. It was complete disruption, and everyone was trying to figure it out, and so if you're a small business, you're trying to figure it out just like others, but yet you don't have the resources of an Apple, of Microsoft, of other companies, and so you try to figure out your own aspect. How can I do it? And so I was even trying to-- I even created some concepts for the web. I wasn't quite clear because I'm learning. So you're again trying to wind down a business, accommodate certain customers, and learn what the internet is, and try to build something to stay relevant. So it was complete disruption.

McIlwain: Can you say a little bit more as we kind of close out? AfroLink, I mean, at the height of AfroLink, who was talking about AfroLink, and at what sort of scale? What number of customers or revenue and so forth did you have, and then more importantly, I think, where do you see AfroLink in this sort of historical development in terms of accolades? You mentioned earlier, the admonition that no matter what happens next, you were first, but maybe say a little bit more about what impact AfroLink had on the tech world, on black folks, and beyond, even as you begin to close out.

Al Mansour: Sure. I'm trying to remember. I think it was '94, I believe. AfroLink had reached the attention of CNN, and CNN, I can't remember the commentator or the journalist, came to my home and did a story,

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[2]2400 baud modems were common into the mid 1990s. Speeds then climbed fast with affordable 14,400 baud, then 28,800 baud, and toward decade's end 56,000 baud modems, the technical maximum for an ordinary analog phone line. ADSL makes phone lines even faster, but requires special equipment at the phone company's central office.

a piece on AfroLink, two minutes and four seconds, and it was on CNN, the World Today, and minutes after that appeared, the phone rang literally nonstop for probably two weeks, and I had customers all of a sudden from Australia, from Europe, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the Bahamas, throughout the Caribbean, West Africa. AfroLink's importance was not just being the first but providing something relevant. Providing something necessary that people wanted. People wanted to know about what bookstores there were, for example, in the UK. Where can I buy-- where can I go to a black bookstore in London? Where can I go to a black bookstore in Toronto? I want to invest in Kenya. Africa Insight provided you the data, the organizations, banking, things of that sort. So the name AfroLink was intriguing to many people. The software provided insight to organizations, to universities, to things that were happening in different parts of the world. So it brought everything closer. It was impactful in terms of just simply knowing more about the diaspora. People would use AfroLink and know more about Africa. They would think differently about Africa. They would think differently about the Caribbean, and there are many people that I encounter and have encountered over the years that say to me and have said even the last few weeks, we need AfroLink again. I still have the data. I still have the IP. I still own the name. I'm actually developing crypto content and digital content in a new way to be consumed. But if you look at the media in different markets, there's information that we just don't get. There's information that's still not available that is both insightful and actionable. So AfroLink provided it when there was nothing else, and it became a tool in many ways, and I agree with many people who have made comments recently that there's still a platform for AfroLink today. Data is not going anywhere. Data will only grow. Data can be visualized. There's some aspects of AfroLink that I'm building visual data models, and so there's still an opportunity, and still an impact that AfroLink can make and will make going forward.

McIlwain: That's exciting to hear and I want to talk-- I want to wrap up with a few questions about the future and the future of AfroLink part two, or whatever it ends up being called. But what do you see on the horizon? You mentioned crypto. You mentioned the types of things that you're looking to produce more in the future. What do you see as the future in this tech sector 25 years from now, both positive, and maybe some fears of what might become if we don't make certain types of decisions?

Al Mansour: Interesting, wow. AI is here. It's going to be both revolutionary and I'm not going to say disruptive. In many aspects of the market, in society, it will even be destructive. Autonomous trucks will be problematic. There's a huge demographic that relies and depends on driving trucks for their income, for their resource, and when you automate trucks, and there's no longer the need for human drivers, if the truckers don't pivot now, and learn battery technology, learn digital mechanics, quantum energy, a lot of different things, it's going to be extremely disruptive. There are certain markets where you don't need-- there used to be the saying, well, if you only finish high school, get a job in fast food. Well, fast food is going AI too. They'll essentially be larger vending machines where you drive in. You punch in your order and you get your food. AI will be extremely disruptive and so where AfroLink plays a role is you need information. There are certain economies where they're trying to create infrastructure for electric cars. Where is that happening? You probably don't know that Belize is trying to create-- my wife is from Belize, is trying to build an infrastructure for charging vehicles, for electric vehicles. That's a data point that will be part of AfroLink. There are certain places where there's solar technology but solar technology only makes sense if you have batteries to store the energy. So where are those batteries being developed? Who's developing those batteries? Where is this happening? Where is that happening? Again, the data opportunities for AfroLink continue, and so if it's one thing I've learned in my 15 years in Silicon Valley, it's not just the data. It's not just having insightful data, but it's having data that's actionable, and so the new

AfroLink is creating actionable data, and we're looking at different models and different ways of delivering the data, and so visualization, being an artist, and also understanding new markets that are TikTok markets, that are YouTube markets rely on imagery, and so incorporating the different artistic aspects and creative aspects, and creating and leveraging huge volumes of data that are timely, and also data that has predictive data, predictive analytics, and creating visual data models that are African centered, that are Caribbean centered, that will allow you to make decisions, predictions based on various data outcomes, and so that's the direction where AfroLink is headed now. But as much as I leverage technology, and appreciate the benefits of technology, and I've created several pieces on this, AI can be and could potentially be extremely disruptive if it's not managed in the right way, and as we continue to separate economically the haves and the have nots, as that divide continues, technology will play a role in that. Hopefully, certain countries don't become techno autocrats. There's rumblings of Silicon Valley becoming too powerful and becoming essentially arms of governments. They censor certain data. They don't censor others. Facebook became Metaverse for a reason. So we really need to understand what does Metaverse mean? Technology is again, I mean, if we learn anything from Atlantis.

McIlwain: Indeed.

Al Mansour: It can be boon or bust.

McIlwain: Let me ask you one last question. Then I know Marc has a few that he wanted to ask. You wrote a book recently.

Al Mansour: Uh-oh.

McIlwain: Yes. Can you tell us a little bit about the-- well, tell us the title of that book, and then the question related to it is, where are we at? Where are black folks at? Where is blackness more broadly in our future, our technological future, and so forth? And so given all that you've known and experienced, written about, et cetera, about both the past and the future, what I took from reading that book was sort of an indelible stamp of blackness on the world, and the ability to see the world technologically and otherwise, through the lens, almost a total lens of black, where blackness is at the center. Is there a future in which the centrality of black folks is possible, is likely? How do you see that potential future in helping us to shape what our technological future is like?

Al Mansour: Interesting. I really appreciate that question. The book is entitled, Divine Consciousness, from a Dystopian Diaspora to Afrofuturism, and I have to admit, I'm a fan of certain movie franchises, and several of them I mention in the book. The Matrix I thought was interesting. The Westworld series on HBO is quite fascinating, and if you look at especially Westworld, what's interesting about that is the concept of loops, repetitive data, and then of course, algorithms, and you have a colleague who wrote a book, Algorithms of Oppression, I believe it is. If you look at the history of black people, even going back to Leopold and the genesis of our enslavement, and you go through the forming of Jamestown, which is interesting here being in Virginia. I visited Jamestown. There are certain things that have happened throughout our history, and it's American history, and there are things that we have done or ways that we've responded that have triggered an algorithm, and when that algorithm kicks in, we go down a certain path, and when we go down that path, the story almost starts all over again. The actors are different, but the circumstances are eerily the same, and I talk about what makes for a dystopian state, and I'm a fan of

science fiction. There are many movies that are based on fantasy, based on pure science and technology. Others provide a glimpse into what a dystopian future is, and as I see these loops continue, and I see our responses continue, and the loops again, start again, it's almost as though we're in this constant state, and there are certain things that we need to do, and I talk about that in the book, and certain choices we need to make to break out of these loops. If we look to the future, and if-- well, let me just say this. If you look at Kemet, for example, if you look at the Dogon, you look at the Moors, and how they brought light to the dark ages in Spain and other parts of Europe. You look at aspects of Kemet where the technology that they use there, we can't replicate today. So they clearly had a vision to the future. I applaud Hollywood for the movies they make. But we can't continually look 400 years back and never consider what the next 400 years will be. We have to start looking in terms of what's next. If certain parts of the population are going to Mars, does that mean we go to Mars too? Where do we go? How do we envision our future? If it's not Mars, if it's not space travel, how do we envision our future? How do we envision Africa 10 years from now, 50 years from now, a hundred years from now? So when I talk about Afrofuturism, it's not just wearing certain clothes. It's not just creating certain music. Wakanda Forever could be Wakanda forever, but it has to start somewhere. It has to start with a vision or some insight into what a future society, a future version of myself can be, and allowing a certain state of consciousness, understanding where we've been, and where we certainly don't want to go again, choosing not to go into another loop. We have to envision what the future will be. We have to maintain our culture. In America, they're eroding voting rights. Critical Race Theory seems to be a very don't-say-that topic. Will civil rights along-- they talk about our enslavement being removed from textbooks. Will the civil rights movement be removed too? If that's the case, where do we end up? We have to take control of our narrative. We have to take control of our culture, and how we envision our future culture, and what that will be.

McIlwain: Thank you for that. Marc, did you want to jump in with a few questions that you had?

Weber: Sure. So going back to that, when you first saw the Princeton professor on TV, there's something that led you to want to respond to that, not, I don't know, writing a book or trying to do something in a conventional medium, but you had some faith in computers or excitement about computers, and I'm just wondering where that came from. Why did you think computers were a suitable medium to do something important and what led you to that?

Al Mansour: That's a great question, and again, there are certain aspects of development where there are things that we use that we take for granted that are tools. I look at podcasts today and what it reminds me of is my grandmother listening to the radio in the early 60s. For me, it's radio. Podcasts are an extension, an expansion that leverages technology, that leverages the convenience and availability, just like a transistor radio did in the old days. So it's almost to the point of being not so much ubiquitous but being viable and being necessary. It's also transformative and transitional. So in other words, the black community relied heavily on beepers. During early hip hop, the beeper was synonymous with the easiest and swiftest way to communicate. In many ways, it was technology. We then developed a sort of cryptography or our own codecs for transmitting data. Certain ways you typed in numbers or typed in letters, it conveyed certain messages. So it became a platform that made information consumable, but it also expanded the audience. People wanted a beeper, so they could then communicate, so it expanded. So when I saw the Princeton professor and the software program called Culture, one, I thought I had to respond. But then also, I had to provide some form of how I could communicate another aspect of culture. But then also convince, if you will, or influence, I guess, is the new term, right, TikTok? I had to influence

a body of people to leverage technology, to leverage certain tools that they might not have thought about otherwise. So a beeper couldn't do it. The cell phones were huge in those days. That couldn't do it. Documentaries, to get someone to sit and listen to a documentary. I could have written a book. But I thought, the excitement, the newness of technology, and especially computer technology was compelling, and if it was compelling for me, I certainly wanted to convey to others that it could be compelling for them as well. So somewhat of a roundabout response, but just trying to share that it was something new, but something that I thought would be exciting and fresh. So that was the choice.

Weber: Talking about the BBS, CPTime Online, had you been on BBS as much before that? Were you using CompuServe or AOL? I'm trying to think when you did the disk and also the BBS. You've talked more I think about what you knew about computer standalone stuff. But had you been online? What gave you that idea?

Al Mansour: I hadn't been online. The Jamaican cousin I mentioned was a huge proponent of Morse code. He said, "If all else fails, Morse code." But then also shortwave radio and so it was really more trial and error of looking at just different ways to communicate. So it was through him, through others that they shared the bulletin board. So I said, well, I don't want to really learn Morse code because you have to learn Morse code to then get a license to do shortwave radio. Shortwave radio, it didn't make too much sense. Not knocking it. I'm sure it has a place. But it was more so the convenience to the person consuming the information and then also the way that you could package and sort of streamline data. So it's basically data bytes. So I hadn't spent a lot of time on it, but I had enough exposure to understand that it could be a good starting point, and again, could be something different and interactive for different people.

Weber: But in the end that was much smaller than the disk.

Al Mansour: Yeah, I mean, it's funny. They use the term cannibalize, so in many ways, AfroLink, the software cannibalized CPTime. When you're introducing something new, you're essentially creating a market. The market has to catch up to what you're offering, or at least they call it user adoption now, so the users have to adopt what you're offering, and so there was far less of an opportunity for people to go online. You have to get a modem, go online, connect through your phone, connect through a modem, look at a screen and capture data bytes, versus the opportunity to see something visual. Again, going back to something visual, something graphic, something engaging, something interactive. So the software allowed me the freedom to be a little bit more creative, and expressive, and create a much more interactive and engaging experience for the user, and so the user adoption was swift. It was rapid and essentially cannibalized CPTime Online. Another pivot, I had to pivot.

Weber: I'm sure a lot of the multimedia aspect was important and that was very hard to do.

Al Mansour: It was important. I mean, yeah, it provided instant feedback. It was again, engaging. It was exploratory. I mean, you're essentially-- I mean, we all know. I mean, you're moving through an experience, and it allowed me again, to be self-indulgent, to leverage my art and create experiences and environments, the graphical user interface. It was exciting just creating these interfaces for people to experience.

Weber: Charlton wrote in his book about the 1994 Washington conference. It sounds like it was kind of a turning point. Not necessarily in a good way, but discouraging. Can you talk a bit about that?

Al Mansour: Yeah, it was interesting. Our politicians, the Congressional Black Caucus had a great opportunity. I mentioned this on the book tour with Charlton in Seattle. At the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Conference, you had not just myself, but you had a few others there who were introducing tech, information technology. The US was plagued with a number of issues. The Crime Bill was off the charts. Rodney King had taken place. There would be other Rodney Kings. It was troublesome. AfroLink had created a repository of data. You had other areas that had repositories of data. In many ways we were the early or the precursors to data scientists. At no point in time was there any politician and I've met a few-- the tailoring was impeccable. I must say, one of the things about being in Congress, you had tailoring that was just off the dial. But beyond the tailoring, there was absolutely zero interest in leveraging, if not individuals that were creating data, but data, or at least understanding how-- and Charlton wrote in his book, certain governments like the South African government leveraged IBM. Why not the Congressional Black Caucus leveraging black technologists to create data models to provide additional insight, again, predictive analytics, insightful and actionable data on parts of their job? But then if you do that, then you're challenging. Unlike certain other politicians who were savvy enough to leverage Cambridge Analytica, how to leverage technology for their benefit, at no point in time, did the Congressional Black Caucus provide any impetus that they would leverage or could leverage black technology. So it was somewhat disenchanting to put it mildly.

Weber: And I mean, Charlton, maybe that was just the positioning. As I recall, that was kind of at almost the end, a pivot from-- the beginning of a more discouraging era. Although, I guess it's also the beginning really of-- I mean, it's before the peak of NetNoir and online things. But I guess it just makes what Kamal did... as you say, the BBS was cannibalized partly by the disks, but you did have this amazing content as the world did move to the web. That's tough to do as a small business. But did you think of, I think you did, working with one of the larger-- NetNoir, GoAfro, others to bring some of that content to the web? What was your thinking about that at the time?

Al Mansour: My first thought was to rebuild my coffers, to be honest with you, and I guess being in the position of developing AfroLink, I wanted to understand for myself how I could build or create a part of or extend myself onto the web. I didn't necessarily look at licensing the data to other platforms. I didn't think about it. I thought about how I could build the next iteration or version of AfroLink. Not in terms of isolation, but I just didn't have insight into what the other platforms were doing until several years later. I did actually begin a website in 2000 called unVOZ.com, which was based on Caribbean insight. It was specifically Caribbean insight and more central South American data. Still Afrocentric but more focused on that. But at that point, I was looking further down the road. I, one, was not so much jaded, but a little exhausted, if you will. I wanted to reestablish myself in corporate and in tech to gain a little bit more insight as to where the industry overall was headed and I also wanted to focus more effort and attention on just creating. So I kind of set the data aside and focused more so on creating art and I said, well, I can get back to the data later. So I could have leveraged the data to NetNoir. As I learned more about where they were headed, I wasn't quite sure of the fit. So I really focused more so again on just creating and picking another time later to reposition.

Weber: A couple of sort of real fill in questions. So Lotus in Boston, they had a fairly early corporate diversity program. I'm wondering if your wife at the time noticed. Was that noticeable to employees?

Al Mansour: I don't know. To be honest with you, I don't know.

Weber: And then Charlton wrote about you walking into Metrolink in Boston, but I know that was connecting different parts in the book. Was that an important relationship with William Murrell?

Al Mansour: Metrolink.

McIlwain: It was MetroServe, I believe it was.

Weber: MetroServe. I'm sorry.

McIlwain: Yeah. Will Murrell's computer store in Cambridge.

Al Mansour: Yeah. It was a hub, so to speak. Because again, it's sort of one of those things I even experienced at Cisco, where you go into certain buildings, and you see another black person, and it's kind of like finding a bottle of water in the Sahara. It's like, oh, my God, I'm glad you're here. So it was a vital hub and it was something refreshing and glad to see. There was nothing else like it that I knew about. So it was vital to what I was doing and what others were doing. It was vital.

Weber: I think I know the answer to what you wanted to be as a kid was an artist. Am I wrong?

Al Mansour: Yes. You're absolutely correct. I still want to be an artist.

Weber: And then I think I really wanted to just go back more chronologically, and I guess, Charlton, if you-- just to talk about how he did transition back to art on the later stage.

McIlwain: Right. Yeah, that's just that period of after AfroLink and I think that may have been how I first found you or at least looking at your footprint of artwork over the last 15, 20 years and sort of your exhibitions and so forth.

Al Mansour: Yeah. That was interesting, and I say I'm still an artist because I mean, it's they call it an art practice. But what was interesting, I experienced a few different corporate gigs and it was, I think 2004, 2005, I started losing relatives. You get to a certain point in life where people start aging, and the rapidity and succession of deaths in your family have a certain phase where they accelerate, and so I wondered. I said, okay, well, I don't know how long I have. I'm not worried about how long I have. But while I'm here, why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? AfroLink was cool. AfroLink did what it needed to do. But I was seriously questioning why I was here, and my mom called me out of the blue and said, "Are you watching Oprah?" and I was on disability at the time from a job, and I said, "No, I'm not." She said, "Well, there's a guy on there with a book who is a former VP of marketing at Google. He has a book called *What Should I do With My Life*, and I didn't see the segment, but I did buy the book, and there were a number of stories in the book, not all of them successful, and there was a former prosecutor who opened a bakery

in DC. There were others. It had all these different stories, and I read the book like in two days, which is rare for me, and I literally picked up a pencil and started drawing, and this was 26 years after I had drawn anything that wasn't digital. So it was like picked up the pencil just started drawing, and I called Varnette Honeywood, and we started chatting, and I said, I think I want to start drawing again. She said, "Well then draw." She was a great mentor because that was probably the first and last time she gave me advice. She would always only ask me questions. She would never actually say do this, try this, do that. She would just ask me questions. I just started drawing and but I was still so comfortable in digital. I created some digital images. I leveraged my clipart. I came out with a series of poster art, got into an exhibition, and she then challenged me. She said, "Well, you can draw. You can't rely just on the computer. Use your hands and if you still think you need the computer, mix it." That was it, and the next thing I know, I'm creating collages, and assemblages, or assemblages <French prononciation>. I didn't know what they were. I was referencing spatial relationships, and digital animation, and things like that. Next thing you know, I had three or four pieces. I was visiting her house and Samella Lewis was at her home. Samella Lewis wrote the book on African American art history. I think she was, along with John Biggers, the first two African Americans to receive PhDs in African American art history, and she looked at a friend of hers who owned a gallery, and said, "He's your art history month solo, and so here I am, a few pieces, some digital art. I need 15 pieces for the solo. I had six months. I spent nothing but all day, all night creating work. Couldn't even call myself an artist. People would ask me what I do. I would, "I don't know. I do this. I do that. I do that." It took me about two to three years to even refer to myself as an artist. But that solo exhibition and because of Samella Lewis, that started again another avalanche, and the next thing I know, I'm in solos. I'm in group exhibitions. I'm in museums. Hampton University Museum here in Hampton has two of my pieces in their permanent collection. I'm exhibiting around the country, getting awards for my work, and incorporating digital art behind drawn images. I have a piece at Hastings now in one of their exhibitions where you scan certain things in the artwork, and it takes you to a web page, and so I'm exploring ways of the art, expanding into digital. So all of those digital techniques, all of that comes from AfroLink. The information that's in my artwork comes from AfroLink. So it's an aspect of AfroLink that continues and it's something that I cannot stop doing.

Weber: I think in between though, you did transition to IT after and before going.... could you fill in that?

Al Mansour: Sure. When I left AfroLink or wound down AfroLink, I joined a high-net-worth investment firm. I don't want to say the name. But they managed portfolios, Michael Jordan, a number of Lakers. They own a family of mutual funds. They started Sequoia Partners which funded Yahoo and golf.com. I was in their legal department negotiating contracts and deals. I wasn't doing securities but doing all other aspects of contracts. They were moving into electronic trading. So I was doing a lot of deals, Dow Jones interactive, and all these different deals for electronic trading and things like that, and I created an intranet for the legal department and was actually chastised for doing so. It was a no, no. But I thought it would make work easier and make things more interactive among counsel, and I said, "No, I like creating." It was before Y2K. A lot of my deals were Y2K deals, and so I joined Farmers Group, which was the parent company to Farmers Insurance, and was soon to become part of Zurich, North America, again, financial services industry, and joined them to develop and create a software asset management system. Was I capable of doing that? I did it, and it was successful, and it was tech. So that was my pivot, going from legal, negotiating essentially, tech deals to working in a company in their IT group. But what I quickly learned is being in IT, you can work yourself out of a job because if you create something that is

automated, something that is efficient, then you're reducing headcount. I learned that later in Silicon Valley, that job security has to be number one in terms of how you approach IT because you can create something so efficient that again, just like we're talking AI, the human resource becomes irrelevant, and so that was my pivot into IT, and then went from there, and ultimately joined Cisco Systems in 2007, and continued creating. So as I tell people, Cisco has become the VC, the venture capital of my art career, exploring certain aspects like the new AfroLink and different things that are part of my venture.

McIlwain: A couple of just quick, final questions. One about you. One about the future for young people, and thinking about diversity in the tech industry and so forth, what advice would you give to young folks looking to pursue that industry or to transform that industry in some way?

Al Mansour: Wow. Learn fundamentals. It's old school, but what I've seen over the years is that young people jump in. They jump in and instantly become siloed. They know what they know and they don't know anything beyond the silo. Try to position your career so that you have a broader view of what a company does. Every company is not designed to be an influencer. Every company is not designed to be a TikTok, Snapchat. Whatever the hottest tech is, an app, every company is not purely designed just to be an app, just to be the most influential tech platform. Because if that technology fails, how do you then move to the next thing? And so you really want to build something that's foundational that you can carry with you from gig to gig. Never stop being a student. Never think that the technology you're working on is the most innovative, brilliant thing that exists. Try to understand and explore where various industries are headed. Learn about things that don't yet exist. It's hard to do but you need to do that. Keep in the back of your mind what opportunities exist to become a pioneer. So for example, my youngest son, I have three, loves gaming. He thinks gaming is the be all and end all and is more drawn to becoming a gamer on certain platforms and people subscribing to watch him game. I said, well, if you-- and he had at one point, an opportunity to join EA, if he continued in art, so my thing is, I told my oldest son this too, join a certain gaming platform and become a tester. Then you're playing games every day, but you're also looking for the break points of gaming. Then you understand every aspect and attribute of the game. You know how it works, where the fail points are, et cetera. Then expand that into other things. So find a starting point, build the foundation, and then build on top of that, build on top of that, just like coding, and build on top of that. Don't be afraid to fail. Don't think that you-- this is hard for millennials. Don't think that there's something you don't know. Because there's so much that you don't know and be open to opportunities that you didn't think or don't think would work for you. Again, millennials don't want to do anything that they don't want to do. But there may be certain things you have to do to be in a position to do what you want to do. It's really just that simple. So that would be my best advice. It's heading AI. Learn AI but learn what's beyond AI. If we're going solar, learn battery. How do you store the energy that the sun collects? So again, look at foundational aspects of technology, not just the interface, not just the top layer, but look at all the layers beneath.

McIlwain: Something you bring up in there, and I talk to a lot of young people and sort of mentioned this in the same kind of vein, which is you're still-- if they're going into tech, they're still looking at being part of an industry that's not diverse, where they may still be the only one in the room, particularly at a certain level and so forth. Is that your take as you see the diversity within Silicon Valley, within the tech industry? Is it pretty much the same as it's been historically in that way?

Al Mansour: It's getting better. For many years, there'd be an event at Cisco of 300, 400, 500 people. There'd be maybe 3 of us in the room, 5 on a good day. Believe it or not, because of George Floyd, companies have found it necessary to respond. So there are many companies in Silicon Valley and in tech who have increased numbers at lower levels, but in terms of the C-suite, in terms of being in certain positions where you can influence and be an influencer within the corporation, be in a decision-making position versus a support position, the numbers still are not good. There are many occasions where you have middle rung of management, which is the most problematic. Certain higher levels from a philosophical point of view or a community point of view want to do the right thing. But it's the middle layer that has to implement and the middle layer is problematic in companies. Diversity, it's a little better. It's nowhere close to what it should be and it's not just the employee in the company. But it's also the smaller business that provides services to that company, supplier diversity. That's nowhere near what it used to be, and unfortunately, for many companies, personal experience, it's a check the box. They do just enough to check the box and then they move onto something else. It's funny because they often-- the term diversity and inclusion are used together. There are certain aspects that are diverse. But then how do you measure the extent to which you're included? I think that's the disconnect. You can bring diversity to the table, but do your ideas, do your thoughts? Does your expertise count to the point where it's included in things that matter?

McIlwain: Going to end the hardest question. One word. Think about summarizing your life, your experience, your approach to your art, your work, technology, all of that. What would that one word be?

Al Mansour: It's gratuitous. No, that's not the word. The word that I'm going to choose is gratuitous. It would be Afrofuturism. That's the word.

McIlwain: That's it.

Al Mansour: Yeah.

McIlwain: That's a great way to wrap it up. Marc, do you have anything else?

Weber: I'd say no; it was a wonderful interview!

END OF THE INTERVIEW