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Oral History Interview with Kiara Arias

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

RACIAL UNREST 2020: EXPERIENCES FROM THE STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY
COMMUNITY DIGITAL PROJECT

Oral History Interview with
Kiara Arias

Stony Brook University Libraries Digital Projects

Stony Brook University

2021

PREFACE

The following oral history interview transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kiara Arias conducted by Maïa Gomis on June 5, 2021. This is a transcription of the spoken word.

This interview is part of the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project, created by the Anti-Racism Task Force of Stony Brook University Libraries.

Transcriptionist: Software and humans working in the Stony Brook University
Libraries Digital Lab
Narrator: Kiara Arias
Interviewer: Maïa Gomis
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
Date: June 5, 2021
Pages: 8

[00:00:00] Maïa Gomis: [June] 5, [2021]12:46 PM. This is Maïa Gomis interviewing—

[00:00:06] Kiara Arias: Kiara Arias

[00:00:08] Maïa Gomis: —for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Firstly, thank you for spending the time to tell us about your experience. Um, can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:21] Kiara Arias: Yeah, sure. So I, um, actually just graduated from Stony Brook a few weeks ago in May, and I was a student there since I was a freshman. Um, so yeah.

[00:00:35] Maïa Gomis: Okay. So the first question I want to ask you is; What do you first remember when you heard about George Floyd being murdered? What was your initial reaction?

[00:00:46] Kiara Arias: So when I first heard about it, it wasn't through social media. I think it was some of my friends were talking about it. And I, I think I came across a couple of articles, so I hadn't seen the video yet. Um, and I think as bad as this sounds, I've become desensitized at the time to a lot of killings of Black men at the hands of the police. Um, at first it was a lot more, you know, emotional for me, but then when I first heard about it, I was like, okay, this is—this isn't anything new. But it wasn't until I saw the video where I actually, you know, started crying. Um, and I couldn't escape the video either because it was a very, um—it's a traumatic video to watch and see all the time on social media. And seeing people have discourse about it, like this is something that you would think most people would agree with and be on the same page with, but the fact that there's even room for disagreement is a very unsettling thing that I think that I will never get used to.

Um, so yeah, that's the first thing that comes to mind.

[00:02:10] Maïa Gomis: So, um, many who witnessed the murder described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Would you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:02:20] Kiara Arias: I would definitely say it's a pivotal moment. Um, as I mentioned earlier, I was desensitized - I think a lot of people were desensitized to things like this happening - but because of COVID and the way that everyone was forced to be at home, we were also forced to almost spend more time online, because there was nothing else to do. So we were exposed to this video that normally we may not see as often. So because we couldn't escape the reality that was police brutality. I think a lot of people felt more motivated to do something about it because they had more time to do something about it. Um, so I would say that his death or murder in particular, um, is definitely pivotal just because of, you know, the historical context surrounding what was going on in 2020. Um, with the election coming up in November with, um, a pandemic happening and people, you know, having more free time. Um, for sure I think his name is a name that's going to be, like people in our generation will never forget George Floyd.

[00:03:30] Maïa Gomis: So have you been actively involved in any anti-racism activism like Black Lives Matter, and civil rights movements, and protests and such?

[00:03:39] Kiara Arias: Um, so beforehand I think I, you know, obviously supported Black Lives Matter, but, um, I think after the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and it seemed like even more people, um, that summer, somehow, um, I felt more inclined to share those views online. Um, typically I didn't really post a lot on Instagram before, like even about my personal life. Um, but that summer I decided, you know—I went to school with a lot of, um, white people in Staten Island who I hope would've changed, but just in case they didn't, I felt even more motivated to, to share those types of views on my social media, just to let them know where I'm at. And if you're now where I'm at, then please don't follow me because, um, you know, I think it's good to surround yourself with people who like challenge you sometimes. But if people are, you know, questioning whether or not you have the right to the same sort of life that they have, that's where I'm like, all right, I don't want it. I don't want it. You can unfollow me, whatever. It's not a big deal. Um, so, yeah I think I've taken those views a lot more seriously now. Um, and passionately than I did before, I'm more vocal about it. Um, so outside of like social media— whoops, my AirPods came out—

—after the death of George Floyd, I wanted to, I felt like I, I needed to do something because like I was, I was at home, right. School was over. Um, I couldn't leave my house because of COVID. So I was, I felt like I couldn't do anything of, you know, substance to help the movement. So that's when, um, I saw people going on Live to talk about it, and I realized like, a lot of people are traumatized by this video, like, and need to talk about it with other people and can't, because they can't see each other. Um, so that's when, um, this thing that, um, was, is now like, sort of a

platform for other students, for the USG page, the Undergraduate Student Government page on Instagram, Stony Speaks, that's how it started. Where I wanted to talk about it with people and I didn't have anyone to necessarily talk about it with. Um, so I, I figured other people would feel the same way about not just George Floyd, but other issues as well, and like educate our peers. So I did that. And then I was also part of some committees, anti-racism committees, over the summer that personally, I don't feel amounted to anything. Um, we had a whole list of priorities and nothing happened or came of that. And a lot of them were pretty easy fixes in my opinion. Um, and yeah, those are the things that I joined after the fact, or was a part of.

[00:06:55] Maïa Gomis: Okay. So what does Black Lives Matter mean to you?

[00:07:00] Kiara Arias: To me, Black Lives Matter is an empowering movement for Black people. It's not, for me, it's not just like Black people deserve the right to live. And deserve you know, the right to be treated equally under the law. Yes, that is true. But I think it's so much more than that, because after the movement began, I felt more empowered to be a Black woman. Um, and more confident in being a Black woman. I think that's really important because for a lot of Black people, um, who enter white spaces, they don't always feel that empowered or that comfortable. Um, But Black Lives Matter is sort of changing the narrative, I guess, and making us feel more comfortable with who we are. And like, we should be comfortable with who we are as we are. Like, we don't have to, you know, try to assimilate to fit whatever, uh, you know, would make us more palatable for different types of people, which, um, I like. So just being comfortable with who you are is what that means to me. Black Lives Matter means to me.

That's a great response. Thank you.

[00:08:21] Maïa Gomis: So, can I ask, um, have you or someone you know ever been a victim of racial discrimination?

[00:08:29] Kiara Arias: Oh yeah. I mean, I, I live on Staten Island. I went to middle school and high school on Staten Island. Um, honestly, not so much at Stony Brook. That didn't really happen to me because it was way more diverse than Staten Island, so I wasn't necessarily surrounded by as many white people. Um, but unfortunately it's usually for me, it usually came from white people. Um, it can come with people, come from people of any race, obviously, but because I was surrounded by more white people, um, who also, haven't had a lot of experience with Black people, um, it usually came from them.

Um, the first thing that comes to mind is like middle school. So I'm, of a lighter complexion. I obviously know that how that affects me in my day to day interactions. But I was friends with a lot of Black girls in middle school who were a lot darker than me, and I saw the difference in how I was bullied because I was

bullied by the white people, but from how I was bullied, to like the darker girls. And like, for me, they just like made fun of like my hair. That was it, which was a sensitive spot. But like what they told them was 10 times worse than that, they made fun of their hair, their body, compared them to animals. Once you start dehumanizing a person, you forget that they have feelings, you start treating them as subhuman. So these other kids didn't even see my friends as human at the time. Just, just by comparing them, just by making that comparison, it was clear.

And then moving on to high school, um, I was in high school in 2016, so there was the election. A lot of people would wear Trump shirts and Trump flags. When he won, there were even teachers who wore Trump shirts, which I thought was very unprofessional and it made me very uncomfortable. Um, luckily I had some teachers who were vocal about not liking Trump and, um, that made me feel more comfortable talking to them, but there were some teachers who I thought I can confide in and be like, oh, like, I can't believe people, oop!— sorry.

[00:10:46] Maïa Gomis: You're ok.

[00:10:47] Kiara Arias: My mom started FaceTiming me. Let me text her right now.

Yeah. So there were even teachers who I would try to confide in, who didn't even understand like where I was coming from because they were all white. I never had a Black teacher until I was in college. Um, well, no, I had, um, Black teachers in elementary school, but, um, they were Afro-Latina/Latino. So, um, they didn't necessarily get the same Black experience because they weren't, they were just always around Hispanic people. So they weren't really exposed to the same things, but whatever.

So another example of someone else making fun of my hair, um, would be - so in, um, this is something that like, I really just made me not like myself just because I was Black. Um, so a lot of people would talk about like my hair when I started going natural, which I think is a sensitive point for a lot of, um, Black women. Um, so when I started transitioning, um, I didn't know what I, what I was doing, cause I never, you know, saw my natural hair before. Um, but I started wearing it out because I was like, you know what, I need it to grow. Um, and what I'm doing right now, isn't working. So I started wearing it, um, like these little like buns or whatever. Um, and you can see the heat damage, but whatever I was trying.

And this white girl, um, who was sitting next to me, was talking to her other white girlfriend and was like, "Ugh, God her hair is so nappy", like mad, loud. Um, "her hair is so nappy" looking over at me and everything. And I look over and I'm like, in my jumps, I'm, I'm pretty quiet in school. I don't really talk to a lot of people in class generally. Um, and she's like, "Yeah, if I had hair like that, I would literally hate myself." And she said it loud enough. Like she wanted me to hear. She was looking

at me as I looked at her saying this. So, she felt, you know, bold enough to say that, bold enough to get the support from her group members around her.

And, you know, in looking—so, okay. We're older now. People can change whatever, but I think what still scares me is that I found her online the other day and I saw she's actually trying to be a doctor. So it's like people like that, going into the medical fields, legal fields, doing all of these things where they can affect Black people. And, and just because she makes fun of my hair doesn't mean she may be the worst person in the world. Sure. But she still, you know, views Black people in a different way than she views white people and that's not okay.

And I think you should be uncomfortable with knowing that there are people like that going into these fields who can affect our lives in very drastic ways. They're going to become educators and, and talk to, you know, younger, Black kids as they're growing up. I don't want that woman to be a teacher and talk to her students that way, you know?

Um, so I, but there was also besides like my hair, people would assume I was dumb. When I got into Stony Brook I remember one of my teachers was like, "Really? No way." It was like so surprised. I was like, "Sis, you knew like," - well, when I got into honor society, she was also shocked. I was like, okay, like, do you, at what point are you going to believe that I'm just like smart? Like I'm not dumb.

Um, but yeah, those are, that happened a lot, but you know what, not for nothing, there were a lot of teachers who were nice to me, who didn't let other students talk to me that way, which I appreciated. Um, and they may have had their own biases that I didn't notice. Um, but at the end of the day, they still were nice to me. And that's that helps. Even that little bit of kindness helps a student.

Um, so yeah, racism is very common and apparent. It doesn't ever go away. Um, I don't know if it can. I hope so. Um, that's a really, uh, difficult thing to escape, I'd say. Because even if your family tries their hardest, you're going to be exposed to it in media, school, social media. Um, so yeah.

[00:15:30] Maïa Gomis: Well I mean, we can always hope, I guess like every generation is supposed to, you know, make things better—

[00:15:39] Kiara Arias: Oh it's definitely—

[00:15:39] Maïa Gomis: —so maybe our generation is going to solve it.

[00:15:41] Kiara Arias: It's definitely a lot better now, but I've seen some weird discourse online, like things that you would only see online, but for people who don't interact with other people in person, think that that's the way the world is.

Think that all POC [People of Color] just hate each other. There's, cause I've seen a lot of TikToks where people, like there's no POC solidarity. And like, yeah, there's a lot of people of color who gotta get it together. But like, if you say that there is no POC solidarity, you're making a lot of middle schoolers and high schoolers who honestly, haven't had a lot of interaction with people in the past year and a half, think that it's impossible. Um, and I don't think that that's necessarily helping the next generation. Um, so hopefully we get that figured out because social media kind of scares me with the things that can spread on there. I mean, look, Trump got elected because of social media, literally, just because of what people were seeing online.

[00:16:45] Maïa Gomis: Yeah.

[00:16:46] Kiara Arias: So.

[00:16:49] Maïa Gomis: I mean, maybe we got to get online and say some stuff too, you know, we have to correct the ignorance a step at a time. Um, so I guess another question I would like to ask you is, um, what do you think of Stony Brook's response to anti-racism and Black Lives Matter, and all of that.

[00:17:11] Kiara Arias: Um, I think they handled it the same way in I saw any business handle it. So it was a very, um—Like, I'm not going to say no one in Stony Brook cares about Black Lives Matter, um, or responding to it. But I think that there were people, the people who cared more about it, didn't—weren't heard. Um, and the people who had more control or power didn't necessarily see it as a priority. Um, may have prioritized other things. Um, cause I, I know of a lot of Black administrators who would have loved to do all of these things for the Black students on campus, um, but are ignored.

And often aren't seen as, you know, of importance for other people within the university. Um, but I'll speak from my experience with the priorities list that we [Black students and administrators] drafted. Something as simple as us just wanting them to change the name of Sanger College wasn't even done. When I'm living on campus and I see them changing the names of all these other buildings from colleges to halls. If you can do that, if you could just take, if you had enough money, cause they were claiming they didn't have money because no one's living on campus. If you have enough money to do that, it's just as easy to just change the letters of a building. And they even added more letters to like the LDS [Undergraduate College of Leadership and Service] center. They renamed that. They renamed GLS [Global Studies], um, a couple of weeks ago to someone else. If you can do that for the people who have been working for your university, the white people, they changed it to other white people's names. If you could do that, why can't you change the name of Sanger, someone who is notorious for eugenics?

Why can't you change the name to make it, you know, to make students feel more comfortable on campus. Um, because when you claim to be for Black Lives Matter and still do things like this, it really feels, um, disingenuous. Um, oh what else did we have on that list? It was just like more education for, um, anti-racism. And I mean, I even suggested making everyone take at least one AFS [Africana Studies] class. Um, but that was, people didn't agree with that one. So they were like, that's kind of hard to do.

Cause people have like really strict like thing—classes that they have to take every year and may not be able to take an AFS class. So I was, "Alright, fine." But I think like that's a good idea. Like it's just history. Like, and I feel like a lot of people, once they take those classes, they learn so much about like racism in America. And I think that it—I would, I think it's a good idea. Um, even in like in our 101 classes, if we take those, why don't we just make it about history? But yeah, that's what I'll say about the response. They're trying, but they could definitely do a lot better to make Black students feel heard on campus. At least some people are trying.

[00:20:40] Maïa Gomis: Oh, I didn't even, I didn't even know about that Sanger thing, that's insane.

[00:20:44] Kiara Arias: Yeah there was a whole Instagram: Rename Sanger.

[00:20:48] Maïa Gomis: Wow. They should make a like a whole, I mean, that should be a thing. That's. Wow. Um, wow. Um, so—

[00:21:02] Kiara Arias: Yup, mmhmm.

[00:21:05] Maïa Gomis: —what good do you hope would come out of just what happened last summer with George Floyd, with the protest, with the rioting? What do you hope for the next couple of years or just the near future to happen. What good do you think is going to come out of it?

[00:21:23] Kiara Arias: Well I think it definitely opened the floor for conversation. Um, I knew of a lot of people whose minds changed after George Floyd. Um, and I'm not saying that they were like these crazy Trump supporters, but I don't think that they knew how racist they themselves have been before that. Um, So I think it allowed for a lot of reflection, um, within themselves, which is nice. Um, and I, and I think it allowed for more, um, Black people to be heard. And like, the way that I'm seeing all of these diversity, equity, and inclusion jobs on LinkedIn pop up, like none of these companies have these jobs before. But now they're, they're trying to, I guess, look more woke. But even doing that, it's still helping someone to some degree. Um, because you know, it's, it's very hard to escape the remnants of right—white supremacy in like all these spaces.

But even doing things like that can help to some degree, even if it's performative, it's still doing something, allowing at least one Black person into a space. And hopefully that Black person opens the door for more Black people into the, the room where it all happens. Um, but yeah, I think it allowed for reflection. I think we all like take a step back and we're like, damn, this country really sucks, um, and has sucked for a long time. Um, and reevaluating the ways that we go about different things, within our day-to-day lives, you know, checking our friends more often. Taking these issues a little more seriously than we have in the past. Um. Talking about them more. Because, like, I already spoke about these sorts of things with my friends, but like, I didn't necessarily follow pages, you know, that just spoke about like certain types of issues online. Like now I follow them and I try to stay updated with certain things. I guess we're educating ourselves more.

Um, and calling people out more often, at least, I mean, I see that online people are. I know I am in my personal life and I've seen other people do it and sort of questioning each other, which I think is good. Like people will be questioning me about a lot of things. I'm like, Hmm. Yeah. Why do I think like that?

Let's talk about it because none of us are perfect. Um, but we're all trying. As long as you're trying, that's what, that's what matters, I think. So yeah.

[00:24:32] Maïa Gomis: Well, thank you, Kiara. I don't have any other questions for you. Um, it's always a blessing talking to you and getting your insight, um,

[00:24:44] Kiara Arias: Thank you.

[00:24:45] Maïa Gomis: And I mean just keep doing what you're doing with Stony Speaks and you know, like I told you before, you have, you have the talent to keep that platform going and people will listen to you. So self-reflection is the, is the name of the game, the theme that we're trying to spread. Again, thank you so much for this meeting.

[00:25:05] Kiara Arias: Thank you for having me. Thanks for doing this. This is really cool. Um, but yeah, have a nice day. Um, hope to see you doing great things in the future.

[00:25:18] Maïa Gomis: All right, thank you.

[00:25:19] Kiara Arias: All right.

[Recording stops]