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Oral History Interview with Lynn Toscano

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with
Lynn Toscano

Stony Brook University Libraries Digital Projects

Stony Brook University

2022

PREFACE

The following oral history interview transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lynn Toscano conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 12, 2022. 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
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Narrator: Lynn Toscano
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
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Pages: 13

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay, so here we are.

[00:00:02] Lynn Toscano: Okay.

[00:00:03] Mona Ramonetti: It is April 12th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Lynn Toscano, for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences From the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Again, Lynn, thank you for taking the time to tell us about your experiences.

[00:00:21] Lynn Toscano: Uh-hmm.

[00:00:22] Mona Ramonetti: Can you tell us how you are affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:27] Lynn Toscano: I've been affiliated with Stony Brook since the fall of 1987, when I started working in the cataloging department, full-time. So I was in cataloging until February of 2011, when I moved into Special Collections, and I am currently the Assistant Head of Special Collections and University Archives.

[00:00:58] Mona Ramonetti: Awesome. Awesome. Okay. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:01:07] Lynn Toscano: You know, when you asked me if I was interested in doing the interview, I was trying to remember that because I do remember watching on TV, all the different news coverage of it, but I was trying to think of when I first heard about it. So I went back and I was looking online for the exact date, and I remembered from the trial of Derek Chauvin that it was in the evening. And, so then I was trying to look back on my calendar and realizing, yes, it was Memorial day. And I don't think I was listening to the news that night.

And, besides, eight o'clock in the evening in, Minneapolis would have been nine o'clock here. So probably I wasn't listening to the news. So I, uh, figured that it was probably the next morning. Which normally would be a workday. However, we were working from home because of the pandemic. So I don't know if I had really

checked any news, but I'm sure it was sometime during the day on Tuesday, the day after.

So I think that was pretty much it. And I, I think the first I heard was just that he had been killed at the hands of the police in Minneapolis. And I think I went online and was trying to catch up a little bit on news coverage to try to understand a bit more about it and where it was exactly in the city of Minneapolis, because I had lived in Minneapolis for quite a few years.

And so I still have some friends there, so I wanted to find out, and I do remember, while this is going off on something else, but I do remember contacting a woman who is a very good friend. I hadn't been in touch with her for a while, but I know she's always been a community activist. And so I figured I would get more personal news from her as to what was happening in the city.

And she did write back to me. So it was good to hear, you know, not just what you see on the news, but to hear from an individual who was living probably about 15 blocks from where it happened.

[00:03:43] Mona Ramonetti: Oh, and what, what perspective did she offer outside of what the news was providing?

[00:03:50] Lynn Toscano: Well, what she offered, she was pretty much saying a lot of the same and how things have to change there.

But what her, one of her concerns was, I think it was right after the first night. There were people who were there. Who were like hiding things in people's yards and behind cars and things like, um, gasoline cans and things like that. So she was concerned about the safety in her neighborhood. She's a bit older than I am.

And she lives alone. So. And her kids live in the city, but yeah a little bit further from her. So I think she was concerned about that. I stayed in touch with her for several weeks after that, off and on. I think it was really only a couple of the first nights, one or two nights that this was going on, where people were taking advantage of the situation. And she said most of them had out-of-state license plates. So it was people coming in and there was turmoil and chaos, and I don't even know what side they were on, whether they were with the police and wanted to show that people were being violent or whether it was people who really were upset and got involved in protests and demonstrations, and it got a little bit carried away. I don't really know, but, and she didn't either. She was just concerned a lot for her safety and her neighbors and her kids.

[00:05:36] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:05:36] Lynn Toscano: So.

[00:05:37] Mona Ramonetti: And so the, and I don't know if you could offer insight into this, the gasoline cans that you referenced, what did she suspect that they were going to do that—

[00:05:45] Lynn Toscano: —She suspected they were, remember, I think it was, it wasn't the first night, I don't think. I think it was the second or third night after he was killed that they, a lot of the demonstrators were in the area and they, the police precinct there was, there was a fire set and I think she was thinking it was that sort of thing where they were going in to different places, businesses, things like that. And just, um, you know, throwing gasoline and lighting, you know, fires and stuff like that.

[00:06:21] Mona Ramonetti: I see..

[00:06:22] Lynn Toscano: So.

[00:06:23] Mona Ramonetti: Oh, oh.

[00:06:24] Lynn Toscano: Yeah.

[00:06:26] Mona Ramonetti: So. What was your initial reaction, reaction to hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, social media, that sort of thing?

[00:06:38] Lynn Toscano: You know, it, it was almost like, oh my gosh, not again. Having sort of kept up with that type of news, what was happening, for several years, several years, even before I think four, maybe even more, seven, eight years; obviously it's been going on for a long time, but it, especially focusing in on events.

Since I know with Trayvon Martin, it was a different, it was, you know, someone in the community who felt he was policing the area, but some of the others after that with, uh, I forgot his name, but the one in Ferguson, Missouri and continuing on up to George Floyd, these people, you know, I mean, it, the police, you know, I'm sure at times they're in situations where they're frightened and they, they react suddenly, and—

Unfortunately accidents happen. This was so blatantly different with, you know, you have four police officers there, and one who just kept his knee on his neck for how many minutes? Before he finally died and he kept yelling I can't, or saying, I can't breathe. Just like with the one on Staten Island, Eric Garner, and you see it happening and happening and initially, you think, well, maybe something will, you know, change, but very little has changed. I think I do remember my friend in

Minneapolis telling me that they really, the city was going to try to renegotiate contracts with the police. And I remember her talking about defunding the police. I don't remember if they actually did withhold any funding, but I think they did do some sort of a renegotiation with the contract. So I, I don't know if that's one tiny step, in the right direction. I'm, I'm not sure. Cause it seems to continue to happen. And I don't know. I mean, in Minneapolis, a year later, it was the, in one of the Minneapolis suburbs, where that police officer mistook her gun for a taser, and, you know.

Yes, perhaps, that's the case. But, you begin, you really wonder, and you would hope the police are trained better than that.

[00:09:28] Mona Ramonetti: Right

[00:09:29] Lynn Toscano: And she had been a, she wasn't a new police officer. She had been on the job for a while.

[00:09:35] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

[00:09:35] Lynn Toscano: So those things, I don't know, I don't know if it'll change. It is just, it seems to, that people are out for themselves now. So it it's in the news for a day or two, and then people move on with their own lives, and the concern for fellow human beings is—I'm, I'm sorry, I don't mean to go off and—

[00:10:03] Mona Ramonetti: No problem at all.

[00:10:04] Lynn Toscano: And just talk like that, but, there are times you wonder, you really wonder about people.

[00:10:12] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. And these types of situations really get you thinking about that, you know?

[00:10:16] Lynn Toscano: Yeah. That's right.

[00:10:19] Mona Ramonetti: So, let's see. Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:10:30] Lynn Toscano: I don't think I did. No, I, I can't say that I really discussed it with anyone. Not in depth at least, you know, just maybe the comments about how sad, what a tragic situation, you know, but not really any discussion.

[00:10:50] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:10:51] Lynn Toscano: Yeah

[00:10:53] Mona Ramonetti: Many who witnessed the murder described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:11:03] Lynn Toscano: It's funny. I think at the time, I thought this could be it. This could be what's gonna change it, because it got so much news coverage. And I don't know if I was just more interested in watching it, it because of having lived there.

But looking back on it now? I, I can't say it was pivotal because, it seems, it, like I said before, it just continues to happen. You know? Maybe pulled together a lot of these tragic accidents or purposeful incidents that maybe together, in the future, people will look back and say, well, all of those things happening, all those deaths that, that started some change, but not pivotal like I would like to see it at, especially at the time.

[00:12:03] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm.

[00:12:04] Lynn Toscano: I just saw something before. And it said that—I think it was last year. There were over 200 Black people killed by police in the United States. Now. I mean, okay, see how many white people were killed in the United States, I'm sure it wasn't 200, by the police.

So I think a lot of training needs to go on, with the police and, there needs to obviously be more positive interaction with the communities that they serve, and, we need, our cities need a lot of help. Because it does seem to be primarily in cities, although I don't know; I haven't really looked into that; I don't know how much in rural areas would be the same, or where they are keeping statistics or anything, but, yeah, it's a situation that needs to be addressed, and, I don't know. And it's, it's the whole, well, the gun thing is different because these are the police who legally have the guns. You know. But it's, he wasn't, he wasn't shot.

He was purposely, you know, deprived air to breathe.

[00:13:37] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah

[00:13:37] Lynn Toscano: And, none of them. It, I think two of those officers, if I remember correctly, were fairly new to the job. But that no one had the sense to try to move the guy a little, move the officer with his knee. I mean, you have three people, three others there who could, you know, I'm sure they, if he tried anything that could have gotten him, you don't have to have him laying there like that.

And then all the people who were outside the store, who were saying to the police, "He can't breathe," "Let him go," I mean, "You've got him handcuffed," you know, things like that and all the video, that people had. I mean, when I watched the trial for Chauvin, I thought, You're getting what you deserve, you definitely are. It was so obvious.

[00:14:39] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

[00:14:39] Lynn Toscano: And the whole world felt that way—

[00:14:41] Mona Ramonetti: yep, yeah.

[00:14:42] Lynn Toscano: —you know.

[00:14:44] Mona Ramonetti: I remember seeing it, uh, I think it was the day after and I thought, this was, the footage was so, it was my, my husband and my son, we were in the living room and, uh, we were looking at each other. You knew what was happening.

[00:15:03] Lynn Toscano: Yes.

[00:15:03] Mona Ramonetti: And you couldn't believe what was happening. And we—

[00:15:07] Lynn Toscano: Exactly.

[00:15:08] Mona Ramonetti: —were watching it, from, on, on a television screen—

[00:15:12] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:15:13] Mona Ramonetti: —I can only imagine what those who were, who were present—

[00:15:18] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:15:19] Mona Ramonetti: —how they process, what they were taking in.

[00:15:22] Lynn Toscano: Yup.

[00:15:22] Mona Ramonetti: It's a very, um. You just know it's a basic, it's a basic thing that you're res—you're responding to. You know when—

[00:15:34] Lynn Toscano: Right

[00:15:35] Mona Ramonetti: —you know, someone's being killed in front of you.

[00:15:38] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:15:39] Mona Ramonetti: And, um. And again, I guess it goes back to the training also that the other, other three did not—

[00:15:47] Lynn Toscano: Yeah.

[00:15:50] Mona Ramonetti: —they didn't get that feeling? Uh, (Lynn: I know) just from a very basic human standpoint, uh, or living thing. I wouldn't even say it, I mean, I, I think as, as living creatures, we know, um, the difference.

[00:16:05] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:16:06] Mona Ramonetti: So, yeah, it was, it was surreal.

[00:16:10] Lynn Toscano: It was, it was like, you couldn't, believe. I mean, we were seeing it after he had died. Okay. But you couldn't believe that was happening. You couldn't believe it. I mean, maybe you could say the first couple when they were getting him or he was coming out of the car and, they got him handcuffed and, or they got him handcuffed before, I think, but, and they got him handcuffed. He was, he was standing. And then he said that he could, he got claustrophobic, I think, in the car and got out of the car and he's on the ground. Okay. Fine. He, maybe he needs to lie there. Fine. But then you go and you put your knee on him like that. And the others are on his legs and, you know, i-i-it's just, this is not, yes, he was a big man, but you're three police officers who can handle stuff like that.

And the guy is handcuffed. How can you do that? I mean, I-I don't know.

[00:17:21] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. Yeah. I think, uh, I think folks are still, struggling with that.

[00:17:26] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:17:27] Mona Ramonetti: A line. There's a line that was crossed that I don't think we can really understand.

[00:17:33] Lynn Toscano: Yeah.

[00:17:34] Mona Ramonetti: For many reasons, I guess.

[00:17:36] Lynn Toscano: Right.

And I don't know if this will ever really change.

Is it human nature? You're going to have people, and people with their biases and prejudices and they don't care about the people they're dealing with. Yeah. It's, it's tough.

[00:17:59] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:18:09] Lynn Toscano: Well, at the time, I was hoping that maybe various police departments throughout the country would start to look at training. They would start to look at, their dealing with the communities and that other people, civilians, would be starting to stand up. And, you know, protest. Peaceful protests.

There, there doesn't, I mean, there were things coming from Black Lives Matter and, some other things going on, but, not the amount you think people would be outraged. And you hope that they will do something, I don't know what else, but. It, it doesn't, as I said before, I think people are too into themselves, and not, not caring about others, you know? Not just other people's property, but other people. You know.

[00:19:12] Mona Ramonetti: Right, a very basic thing.

[00:19:16] Lynn Toscano: Yeah, exactly.

[00:19:20] Mona Ramonetti: What would you like people to know about this time in your life? And what you experienced?

[00:19:27] Lynn Toscano: Well, I'm a bit older. I lived through the sixties, Vietnam War, Civil Rights; I remember in the late sixties, I grew up in Milwaukee, and that summer, there were a lot of different cities that were dealing with their own problems of Black versus white. And there were, there was a lot of violence and, you know, not just peace; there weren't a lot of peaceful demonstrations; they did usually turn violent.

And I remember I was in college, and I was in an apartment. And we weren't far from the so-called ghetto of Milwaukee. And they put in a curfew; I remember at night hearing guns. All night. And my grandmother from Memphis called me 'cause she had seen it on TV. And, I-I was fine, because I wasn't that close to it, but, it made you start to think more. About what, what in our society is causing things like this, that we don't accept other people, just because of the color of their skin, or because they may do things differently?

Makes you think about that; so starting then, [in 19]68, Martin Luther King, and then, Bobby Kennedy, all of that, going through that in my college years. And then, you know, all the way up there have been different incidents where, I have thought, I'm surprised there aren't any demonstrations about this or about that; is it just, y-you know, in a localized area that more people nationally aren't, aren't caring?

And then, this now, I mean, this is tough, and it was tough because, with the pandemic, I mean, it was, it was good to see so many people come out when people were basically staying at home. And it was, I thought, okay, this'll be it, like I said before, this'll be the pivotal moment, but, I don't know. Maybe it did, you know, give people food for thought and maybe at some point, unfortunately something will happen, and, but then maybe people will react and get something, not just react, but get, get something done. Let's push for different programs. Let's push for legislation. Whatever. And I hope, um, just even in conversations with people, that, people will remember because it's definitely something that I'll remember all the way through. So.

[00:22:38] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I, I, I think in terms of the, bringing it to the, to the general public's consciousness.

[00:22:50] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:22:51] Mona Ramonetti: I think it's served that purpose. Um. But, it, it, things don't, uh, as you know operate in a vacuum.

[00:23:03] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:23:04] Mona Ramonetti: And there, so, even with the pandemic, it's intertwined, you referenced it, it, it was intertwined with these demonstrations. Then we had the political climate. We had—

[00:23:13] Lynn Toscano: Um-hm.

[00:23:14] Mona Ramonetti: —you know, the polarizing—

[00:23:16] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:23:16] Mona Ramonetti: —political cli-climate that's still on top of us.

[00:23:20] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:23:21] Mona Ramonetti: You know, there was just so many things, so many factors that, were happening. And to many, it was the first time all of these things were happening, all at the same time.

[00:23:34] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:23:35] Mona Ramonetti: And, um, i-it was just a deluge of challenges, right after the next.

[00:23:42] Lynn Toscano: Yup.

[00:23:43] Mona Ramonetti: An-and I-I-I I wonder, if it's, folks are exhausted; maybe that's why we're, we're not seeing the, the—

[00:23:50] Lynn Toscano: That could be.

[00:23:51] Mona Ramonetti: —I, I have to, I have to, believe that there's progress being made, incrementally though it may be. Um, but, I think we need some reprieve. We need some evidence that something substantial is happening.

[00:24:08] Lynn Toscano: Happening, yeah. Exactly.

[00:24:11] Mona Ramonetti: Maybe it's been happening behind the scenes and we don't see it, but, let's, let's keep the hope up.

[00:24:15] Lynn Toscano: Maybe one of these days we'll suddenly realize that, it has happened. I'm hoping that. Because it doesn't seem like it, but. Maybe. (Mona: um-hm) Maybe we'll get to that point.

[00:24:31] Mona Ramonetti: Right, even like the, this conversation we're having right now, this interview. Uh, this would not have come about, two years ago. Uh, we, you know, it, maybe folks would not have understood why something like this would be of value. So maybe this is the, you know, the, the, the one on evi, a bit of evidence of some incremental, positive change. I don't know.

[00:24:57] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:24:58] Mona Ramonetti: I'm not trying to toot my own horn. I'm just, I'm just putting it out there.

[00:25:01] Lynn Toscano: No, I think you're right. Yeah.

[00:25:03] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. So I have one more question and you don't have to answer it.

[00:25:06] Lynn Toscano: Okay.

[00:25:07] Mona Ramonetti: It's an optional question. Have you or someone you know, been the victim of racial discrimination?

[00:25:19] Lynn Toscano: I can't think of anyone, where, I know that they have been. It, it, it's, I-I have something that is, it's not truly that. So, an Italian immigrant. Who, from Southern Italy, was slightly darker than Italians from Northern Italy, and, in the interview, with the U.S. Consulate in Ita-Italy before they were allowed to come, they asked him, if he, he would be considered dark.

So, it wasn't really, it's, it's not like discrimination, but it was pointing out differences. Why? You know. I do, I haven't, that just made me think. My husband is Italian and from Southern Italy. And when our daughter was born, we lived in Minneapolis. Which, at the time was very, very Scandinavian, and white.

Okay. And, you know, when a, a baby is born and they do the Apgar test, for, breathing, color, oxygen, you know, all of that, the nurse turned to my husband and said, "Do you think she's white? Or do you think her, her skin is darker?" And, why? (laughing) If you're a nurse and you have to tell if, if the kid is getting oxygen, you know, why do you bring up something like that?

But my daughter ended up with slightly darker skin, and I, you know, you compare it to all the other little babies in the nursery there who were blond and very fair skin and she had dark hair and dark skin. So that's, but it's not prejudice. It's not, I think people have that and it might be a basis for prejudice, but it wasn't like we were discriminated against in any way.

So I can't I'm trying to think. I don't think I know anyone else who has had to go through, real discrimination.

[00:27:54] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

[00:27:54] Lynn Toscano: And I've, I've been very, fortunate with that, but I, I don't want anyone to have to go through that.

[00:28:02] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

I mean, I, I think again, and yes, you know, being who I am, I've experienced, what I've experienced, but discrimination on any end of the spectrum or in, in position on the spectrum is still discrimination.

[00:28:17] Lynn Toscano: It is!

[00:28:18] Mona Ramonetti: Um, uh, my, my husband's, uh, grandmother, you know, Italian, first-generation Italian. And, I remember her telling us these stories that she kept to herself for a long time.

[00:28:36] Lynn Toscano: Oh.

[00:28:36] Mona Ramonetti: But yes, it was just, you know, within, and she grew up on Long Island and just, the types of discrimination that she endured as an Italian American.

[00:28:45] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:28:45] Mona Ramonetti: And it's, it's appalling, it's appalling, um, that folks still continue to behave in this manner.

[00:28:56] Lynn Toscano: It's weird because I, I like doing genealogy, and, as I look at census records or even passenger ship manifests. For, for a while there, especially like when the waves of Italian immigrants were coming in they did, they didn't just say for nationality, "Italian," they said, "Italian or Southern Italian," and it, it was, purely, you know, based on, color of skin.

[00:29:29] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm, and yes, and, and the hair.

[00:29:32] Lynn Toscano: Yes. Right.

[00:29:33] Mona Ramonetti: Yup, yup. It's—

[00:29:36] Lynn Toscano: I know.

[00:29:37] Mona Ramonetti: —I chuckle, but it's, it's. You know, I, I don't know, maybe, hopefully at some point, this, is I don't know, I, I agree with you. I don't know if it will be eliminated, but it has to be, uh, squashed in some way, shape or form.

[00:29:54] Lynn Toscano: Right.

[00:29:55] Mona Ramonetti: To some degree.

[00:29:56] Lynn Toscano: Yeah.

[00:29:57] Mona Ramonetti: That's another conversation for another—

[00:29:59] Lynn Toscano: It is! (laughter) Sounds good, Mona.

[00:30:03] Mona Ramonetti: Alright. So I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording and then we'll chat for a little, more.

[00:30:08] Lynn Toscano: Okay.

[Recording stops]