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Oral History Interview with Joseph Pierce

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

Oral History Interview with
Joseph Pierce

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 Joseph Pierce conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 14, 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: Joseph Pierce
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
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[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Alrighty. Uh, hello, there. It is April 14th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Joseph Pierce for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences From the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Thank you Joseph, for spending some time to share your experiences with us.

[00:00:22] Joseph Pierce: Hi.

[00:00:22] Mona Ramonetti: Can you tell us, (laughs) can you tell us how you are affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:28] Joseph Pierce: I am, uh, an Associate Professor in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literature, um, where I'm also the Director of Undergraduate Studies. Um, and I'm also the Diversity Officer for the, um, Stony Brook chapter of the UUP [United University Professions].

[00:00:51] Mona Ramonetti: We'll dive right in. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:01:00] Joseph Pierce: Um, immediately, uh, I'm fairly, um, I, I'm not, I don't always read the news. Um, that's something that I think has dwindled for me in these couple years. Um, I don't listen, I used to listen to NPR [National Public Radio] every day in the morning and I've stopped doing that.

Um, I used to read the news more consistently and I kind of have stopped doing that, but I am fairly active on, um, social media and Twitter. (Laughs) Um, and so a lot of, you know, my friends there, um, were posting about it and, so I, I'm pretty sure I became aware fairly soon, um, after that. Yeah.

[00:01:59] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. What was your initial reaction to hearing about George Floyd's death?

[00:02:12] Joseph Pierce: I think that. With, with George Floyd and as with other similar deaths in custody or, or at the hands of police, my reaction is, is often, um. Anxiety about, how much more policing is going to happen in the wake of

something like this and, and how the response is almost always increased policing rather than, um, looking squarely at the systematic nature of these types of, um, this type of violence against people of color. Um, so I think, to be honest, when, my, my first reaction was probably, Oh shit, there's gonna be more, police, and it's actually gonna be worse.

Um. And that, I mean, that was my reaction then, that was my reaction most recently, too, with the, you know, the Brooklyn, um, subway, um, shooting that happened this week. Um, it's, it's always the response of, of the state to increase the thing that is actually doing the harm. So that's kind of my reaction to that.

[00:04:10] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah.

You know, I wanna circle back to what you said, to the first question I asked you, the second question; you don't watch television, you don't read newspapers, um, may I ask why, the reason for that?

[00:04:35] Joseph Pierce: I think I, this, this is something that, is a fairly recent development for me and it, and it is that I am no longer shocked.

I'm no longer shocked; I used to be. I used to be indignant. I used to be, um, outraged. And. I think this happened around, around when Trump got elected actually, um, is that most of the news that I was seeing was sort of, amazed, or, you know, uh, a gasp when, you know, somebody did something racist or, you know, some something, you know, seemingly um, out of the ordinary happened and the problem is that it is not out of the ordinary. It is the norm to subject people of color to exacerbated levels of violence. That, that is the norm. It is not abnormal for that to happen. It's not right; it's not, it shouldn't be. But I, I ran out of energy to dedicate surprise to these things. I'm no longer surprised.

And I also think that, that, that there's a sort of, the news for me became a source of constant, incitement to shock and awe, when that's actually not, um, productive for me. Um, and I think it's, that's endemic to, to media today, that they, that, that, you know, they make money off of that shock and awe and, and they sell newspapers and subscriptions based on that.

Um, and so, not all of them, but most of them, right? That, that, that's the business model, in general. But I, (sighs) I don't, um. I became. I can't, I can't start my day with that type of, um, like constant, um, barrage of things that white people think are abnormal, but for us are constant. Like. I'm glad that white people are shocked, when another person of color is, is murdered in custody or in a confrontation with the police; I'm glad that they're shocked by that. They should be shocked by that. But, um, it's not shocking to people who confront that daily, um, and who live under a constant state of threat of police violence; that's not shocking. So, and I think I

should say also that, like, you know, I'm. Uh, I'm Native American, I'm a Cherokee citizen.

I'm not Black; I'm a Non-Black Cherokee citizen so my relationship with, that type of, my personal experience with that type of police violence is not the same as, um, um, like, particularly situated Black people in neighborhoods of increased surveillance. Um, but at the same time, you know, Native American people are actually, like, have the highest rate of incarceration per ethnic group in the United States, in Canada, in Australia. So, systemically, like this is something that I'm well aware of and, again, I'm not surprised because it's, it's the. Like, if we're talking about the system of policing, policing is predicated on, the apprehension of people of color, like that's, that's the basis of, that type of, um, like, uh, carceral system. And I guess, you know, what I, what I mean to say, this is a very long answer. Um, I've, I've stepped away from the immediacy of, of reaction because I, I understand that, I understand that the systemic nature of these things means that it is not; it is not abnormal, to see, um, violence, exacerbated levels of violence against people of color; in fact, it is part and parcel with the systems of policing as they exist today. So I've moved from a, from a kind of space of reaction to a space of, um, like, begrudging understanding of the systemic nature of these things.

[00:10:09] Mona Ramonetti: Where does that leave you?

[00:10:13] Joseph Pierce: Where does that leave me? (Mona: Um-hm) Um.

It's not all, it's not like it's not a, it's not a nice place to be. (Both laugh) But I, I think that, um, you know, one of the things that has helped me. Has helped me through, has helped me kind of, um, um, navigate these tumultuous years is seeing how a lot of my, um, dear friends and colleagues, um, particularly artists, are creating, are responding to this violence in, in, um, grounded and forceful, but not immediately, not knee-jerk reaction, reactions. So, for example, I, I, one of my really closest friends is, uh, an Australian, an Aboriginal Australian artist. His name is SJ Norman and. Um, three years ago, he created a, a performance that's more than a performance, but he, um, incised or, you know, um, 140 some scars on his back, uh, in commemoration or in, in the memory of, um, the number of people who had been killed in Australian prisons of Aboriginal people who had been, who had died in police custody in Australia.

And, (sighs) um, you know, we have an ongoing, collaborative, artistic relationship and, um, curatorial relationship and we talk about these, these, these things a lot. We talk about, um, what it means to respond to violence, um, against our communities in ways that, bear witness to that violence while also not allowing ourselves to be defined exclusively by that violence.

I think that's something that I've learned is, is that I was in a space of, reacting constantly and allowing myself to be defined by that reaction, rather than make,

than allowing myself to, um, also feel joy in being with other people in spite of that onslaught and that violence. Um, so I try to, I've tried to, to not let that be the thing that defines who I am.

Um, but rather creating a community, oftentimes through art and through sort of creative community expressions that, um, that means that, um. The structural nature of violence against, in my case, Indigenous people is not the only determining factor of who I am as a person. That's what I mean.

[00:13:45] Mona Ramonetti: Yup, absolutely. Great answer. Great answer. When we're finished with this interview, remind me that I, I want to get back to the NP—starting your day with NPR.

[00:14:00] Joseph Pierce: (Both laugh) Okay.

[00:14:01] Mona Ramonetti: Um, did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:14:11] Joseph Pierce: "Anyone" like institutionally or?

[00:14:15] Mona Ramonetti: Anyone affiliated with at Stony Brook University.

[00:14:19] Joseph Pierce: Um, I checked in with, people that I, in my department, I checked in with people who I know live in the city. Um. I, um. I don't, recall availing myself of any support networks that may have been offered by the university, I, um, I (laughs) think that that (laughs) would, um.

To be honest I don't, I don't, I don't trust the university to be a space that is supportive of, people of color in general. Um, particularly in situations of duress like this. I, I, there's not much difference in my mind between, um, a university and, um, a police department in terms of, like, epistemological framing of what it means to be a Black or an Indigenous person in this world.

They're actually part of the same thing. (Mona: Um-hm) Um, and so I would not trust the university to support me in, in the ways that I need to be supported in times like that.

[00:15:47] Mona Ramonetti: Many who witnessed the murder described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:15:58] Joseph Pierce: Uh, I disagree with that sentiment. Um, "pivotal" makes it seem like, uh, things will change afterwards; I think we've seen that things have not changed. I think, I think we saw, um, a ground swell of collective action.

I remember being in protests. I remember particularly, I, I, you know, it was tough 'cause it was COVID and it was in the city and, um, I remember going to, um, there was one march for Black-Trans lives that I went to that was in Brooklyn. It was a very, it was probably the, the biggest, I think I remember, you know, reports saying, um, gathering of that, under that rubric, under that banner.

Um, and I remember that being a space of actually like joy too; I remember like fabulous queens walking through the streets and it being beautiful and caring. Um, I also remember that as a space of rage and that is a necessary space. Um.

But, here we are, you know, and, and things like Black Lives Matter, like, um, provide us with a framework to resist certain types of, of discursive violence and physical violence, but they can so easily be co-opted by sort of multicultural inclusion that then, um, kind of rests some of the radical possibilities that were originally offered by those types of demands.

So if the demand is to dismantle the, the police state, in fact, what we've seen is the opposite, um, it's a, is an increase. And like, you know, Biden [Joe Biden, President of the United States] is, Biden's recent budget is actually increasing spending on the military and the police; we haven't seen a reduction, in police violence. We haven't seen a reduction in, uh, incarcerations, we've, we've, we've seen, you know, and just now, like, we're seeing, um, Eric Adams [Mayor of the City of New York] talking about putting police all over the, city, you know, again, and so, no, it hasn't been. Um, there hasn't been a systemic change.

There hasn't been, um, even a, even a, uh, kind of nationwide conversation about what, perhaps there have been conversations, and I, you know, I've, I've listened to those conversations and I've, um, I, I, you know, haven't had protagonism in those conversations, but, um, I've tried to listen to what people are saying and, and, and participate in, in the ways that I can regarding, um, you know, abolitionism, uh, carceral justice, um, and the intersections with, you know, Black and Native communities, disability, justice, um, and et cetera.

But those changes have not happened, yet. I'm encouraged by the fact that we are having more complex discussions about what this means, but to call the murder of George Floyd "pivotal," I think overlooks, um, the reality that the systemic changes that have been called for are not, forthcoming. Um, and so perhaps perhaps in 50 years, we can, we can see that it was a pivotal moment, but at this point in history, I don't see it as, as such.

[00:20:22] Mona Ramonetti: Uh, the rally. What, how many rallies did you attend, (clears throat) did you participate in, around this.

(inaudible, Joseph: [One])

[00:20:32] Mona Ramonetti: Just one?

[00:20:33] Joseph Pierce: Yeah.

[00:20:34] Mona Ramonetti: Um, were you fearful to participate?

[00:20:37] Joseph Pierce: Um, no. Um, it was more that the question of. Well, I, there were, there were rallies that I could've gone to that I didn't. So to say that I wasn't fearful, I think, is misleading. I, I was fearful enough not to go to some. Um, there were protests at, in sort of the, the Barclays Center in, in, in central Brooklyn that I didn't go to, and those ended up, being fairly, um, violent; I remember there were, you know, police dispersed people, there was, you know, tear gas in some of those. Um, and I didn't go to those. So I went, I went to those where I would have felt, I think the most, the safest, if there's such a thing, (Mona: hmm) but, um, it'd be a lie to say that I wasn't fearful.

I don't know that I felt fearful while I was there, in the protest I did go to, but that was a choice that I made, to, to, to go to, to places with people, right? Like, I didn't, I didn't ever go alone; I went with people. Um, and so I never felt like, um, unprotected by other people? Um, but I don't think I can say that, um, I would've, I don't know that I would've felt the same way in, in some other, other protests that, that people did go to.

[00:22:22] Mona Ramonetti: What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:22:36] Joseph Pierce: I hope we, um, I hope that, um, George Floyd's murder, can stand as a catalyst for, um, better understanding the historical nature of violence against people of color in this country. And that the response to that violence is not an increase in policing but rather a decrease in policing because it is not, through greater, um, surveillance and policing of people that, we, as people of color, um, will become more free as people, but rather by the dismantling of those structures that have only ever served to limit our freedoms. Um, the police, are not, designed to keep people safe. They are designed to apprehend people who are designated as unsafe. And we know, from history, over and over again, that certain people are more often designated as unsafe and therefore liable to be apprehended and, um, treated with a greater, um, with a greater level of, of violence.

Um, certain neighborhoods, like Black and Brown neighborhoods, are under increased scrutiny already; increased surveillance is not going to make them more safe. Um, and I hope in the future, um, we can begin to realize, and actually implement, put, put money and time and effort and, um, intergenerational, um, collective action towards, creating a different type of future that is not predicated on the violence of policing as a safeguard for, um, for thriving communities.

I don't, but I don't know. I mean— (laughter)

[00:25:17] Mona Ramonetti: I'm thinking, as you were saying this, you're talking, dismantling a system that has been in place for centuries, And I, yes; I, I mean, I—you expressed your hope and that's what it is.

[00:25:34] Joseph Pierce: But it's like, it's like, look, I think this is where, um. What I hope is that people listen to, um, to people of color, in a way that we have not been listened to in the past, meaning that, that you take seriously, you, whoever "you" is, right?

That people take seriously, the demands, um, that are born out by our own experiences with police, which, which are that they do not keep us safe. So, start, like if we can start to listen to that, then we can perhaps start to change the relationships that we have, broadly speaking, with policing and with, um.

With the, the cultural position of, of the police and the structural position of the police in society, right? Like as an Indigenous person, I'm, I also know that the police, the military, were used to remove people from our homelands, right? Like I don't have any, illusion. Right, like. Like, I'm a Cherokee person; the Trail of Tears was in, it, an illegal removal of our people from our homelands; it was not a legal maneuver. It was an illegal maneuver that was carried out by the state. So why would I trust the state to ensure my safety, when the state has only ever served to diminish my safety, in a historical sense, but also in a very immediate, you know, like embodied sense.

[00:27:10] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm. Yes.

What would you like people to know about this time in your life, and what you experienced?

[00:27:26] Joseph Pierce: I experienced a lot of, um, frustration, and, I internalized a lot of sadness. Um, I internalized and kept inside a lot of grief. Um, I found it hard to, express this kind of underlying sense of, um being ill at ease in the world for, many different reasons. Um, and I think that—

That, for me, It has taken a lot of time for me to, come to grips with, what these past few years, mean; what, what are the multiple meanings that they, that they have, for me. Um, and at the same time, I was able to find joy and beauty and kindness and love, and, I, I think I am an optimistic person; I, I feel like I've been a little bit pessimistic in this, in this interview, but, but the thing that, that gives me hope actually is the way, are the ways, that people I really care about are, carrying on, making beautiful things, laughing, um, making love, being, being sexy, being desirous in spite of all of this. You know, like, there are ways that we, that we, um,

thrive in spite of, and those are the things that I, I keep trying to, to find. That's where I try to, to go.

[00:29:27] Mona Ramonetti: Um-Hm. Okay.

That's my last question. Is there anything else you would like to share before I hit the stop-button?

[00:29:43] Joseph Pierce: I, um. Stony Brook did a profile of me for the Stony Brook Magazine recently. And one of the things that we were talking about, was diversity, equity and inclusion, and, um, I think that, one of the things I said in that interview was that I, I hoped the university would take a stand. I think that's the phrase I used. And this, this regarding, um, teaching, uh, critical race theory, critical ethnic studies, teaching, um, teaching difficult topics, quote unquote.

And what I mean by that is, in order for us to have any moral legitimacy as an institution, we have to actually position ourselves with regard to the world as it is now, which means remaining neutral in the face of this violence is actually capitulating to the ongoing enactment of that violence. The university is not a neutral place.

It has never been a neutral place; it cannot be a neutral place. And so I want. I want (laughs) administrators, I want colleagues, I want students to understand, to be aware of the fact that, while we are participating in life at the university, um, we are also engaging in ethical practices with regard to people who are different from us.

And that means that we have to take a stand sometimes and say, this is right, and this is wrong. And I have not seen the university do that. I have seen platitudes and I have seen calls for support, but I have not seen any actual, meaningful engagement towards, um, recognizing or reckoning with, the reality of life for people of color in this context, in this place. I've seen, I've seen, um, hmph, "We value you," I've seen, "We want your contributions," I've seen, "You're an integral part to the mission of the university," but I haven't seen, "The university will now become a place where Black people can thrive," I haven't seen that. Because that requires changing the way we operate. It requires actually supporting, um, Black and Indigenous and Latin, Latinx students, people of color, in radically different ways.

It means we cannot be doing things in the same way that we have been doing them because, let's face it, the university, as one of the institutions, as an institution, is also supporting the type of, um, racial, capitalist, cis-normative, heterosexist, um, uh, uh, normativities upon which, this country, this, this modernity is based.

So until we can start to reckon with that, then, you know, I don't wanna hear, "We're supporting students of color," 'cause you're not. Cause you're really not. At the end

of the day. It's more, um, it's more of the same type of, placating, and we don't need placating anymore. We need actual, meaningful, structural change.

That's what I'd like to end with.

[00:33:32] Mona Ramonetti: Action, that's what we need. Yes, I do. I, I absolutely agree. Thank you so much. Stay on because we're gonna chat a little bit more awhile. This was wonderful. Thank you. Seriously, Joseph. Um, just stay on. I'll stop this right now.

[Recording stops]