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Oral History Interview with Elena Davidiak

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with
Elena Davidiak

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 Elena Davidiak conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 11th, 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: Elena Davidiak
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
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Pages: 9

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Great. Okay. Good afternoon. It's April 11th, uh, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Elena Davidiak for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Can you tell us how you are affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:22] Elena Davidiak: Uh, I've been working here as full-time non-contingent faculty for about 13 years now.

[00:00:29] Mona Ramonetti: Oh wow. And your department?

[00:00:31] Elena Davidiak: Uh, Hispanic Languages and Literature.

[00:00:33] Mona Ramonetti: Yes. Okay. Uh, we're going to delve right in. When, when do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:44] Elena Davidiak: I don't remember the exact date. Uh, unfortunately, I did read about it on social media. Um, so it was always, um. After the event, definitely, but I couldn't recall the exact time.

[00:01:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

Uh, what was your initial reaction to hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, or social media?

[00:01:12] Elena Davidiak: Internet and social media, I don't tend to get my news from that, uh, from television and I think, uh, my reaction would be, uh, first, um, disbelief in a way that these things occur the way they occur.

But then also it was a confirmation of my sort sort of, um, racially related in the sense, at some point that I was not really aware of, uh, racial bias when I first came here. Uh, it was not something that affected me and, uh, it took me awhile to really become aware of the present, uh, in the, uh, extent, of, um, racial inequalities that exist here.

[00:01:58] Mona Ramonetti: When you say, when you came here, um, came to the [university]—

[00:02:01] Elena Davidiak: To United States, to the United States but also to New York—

[00:02:05] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:02:05] Elena Davidiak: —Where there is a lot more diversity. So these issues are more on the forefront.

[00:02:11] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Do you recall when these, you know, your first exposure to an issue like this, what we're talking about in terms of racial disparity and—

[00:02:23] Elena Davidiak: It was definitely not my first experience.

And I was also, um, somewhat used [to] by that time to hearing, um, personal narratives, not just, um, people of African descent, but then anybody who is non-white or mixed. Uh, and, uh, I was, I think in the process of hopefully getting more understanding of that, as I say, I do feel like I carry some of, even being a foreigner, uh, I do carry some of the white privilege in the sense that I don't necessarily suffer the same treatment as other people do.

[00:02:58] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

Did you seek out any communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:03:08] Elena Davidiak: In terms of counseling or [to discuss this]?

[00:03:11] Mona Ramonetti: Or just, you know, just reaching out when, when all of this was happening, almost two years ago now? Um, is it something that it was, it was just, it was personal to you, or did you reach out to colleagues within your department or within Stony Brook? [unintelligible]

[00:03:27] Elena Davidiak: Uh, I definitely discuss these issues with my colleagues. I probably brought it up in personal conversations. I did not go for any sort of official counseling or bringing up anywhere publicly. Uh, I do remember, um, thinking that I should really adjust and monitor my behavior with my students and thinking about how this could impact them.

And if I needed to really be more sensitive and be more aware of any issues that they might be facing depending on their race.

[00:04:06] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. It looks like we lost you for a second. You're coming back in, one second. Um, okay, so last we heard of you, you said you needed to be, you are aware that maybe you needed to sort of rethink how you, uh, uh, how you did certain things as it related to the students.

I guess. I think that's what you had said, but I I'm paraphrasing.

Okay. It looks like we lost you.

Let's see if you'll come back in.

[00:04:44] Elena Davidiak: [I] can you hear you now.

[00:04:50] Mona Ramonetti: Yes. Okay. So we're good.

[00:04:52] Elena Davidiak: I think so hopefully, yeah. (both laugh) So yeah,

I was saying how, um, I was thinking more of how I should communicate with my students in my classroom and I should really do anything differently. Or how they would be affected by it.

[00:05:12] Mona Ramonetti: Right. So were there, are there any specifics that you thought, uh, in, in terms of, uh, various changes that you thought you need to make, or you did make, or implement?

[00:05:24] Elena Davidiak: Um, I teach a language and about language and speech is a big part of, um, or, rather, um, ethnicity, race culture is a big part of how you speak and, um, uh, the way you speak to different people. So in the Spanish classes, it was, um, we speak about appearance a lot.

So you have this chapter where you have to discuss looks, and you have this oh, light skin, dark skin and curly hair, and Spanish has a lot of those expressions of. Uh, different ethnic looks and also mixed race. So, uh, I was, uh, being, um, very aware of that.

Say how, how do you teach those? How do you teach those in a way that's just, this is how you say it, but without, um, applying those labels to specific students, "Oh, such and such has curly hair. It was such and such." How would you say well has darker, lighter skin?

So it's a sensitive topic in something as simple as just talking about the appearance and learning about the vocabulary and you need to teach it. But how do you teach it in the way that's appropriate?

And of course, in the linguistics classes, uh, we speak about, um, the different varieties of English or Spanish, uh, the different ethnic groups use within themselves and also, uh, with other groups, the correct English or Spanish versus a type of vernacular English or Spanish, and the stigmatization of certain groups of Spanish speakers. Usually of darker color and others.

So it's, there's a lot you talk about, but also the way you speak, the way you teach, even the basic thing. So it's always there. What I didn't really think about that that much before.

[00:07:17] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Right.

So have you had students commented on that or it's sort of, they've done so naturally that it really is not a, [something that's not discussed].

[00:07:31] Elena Davidiak: I wish it could be done more naturally again, but to me, this is a learning experience. It's not a type of thing I really grew up teaching and learning. I have to absorb it from, um, um, from other people and teach myself about that. Uh, they will comment on it then they think it's, um, they're curious to learn.

Uh, and it's also cultural difference, every language treats those terms differently. They're more taboo in some, and they're more allowed. In others, they're more matter of fact. So it's also teaching them the pragmatics of language. Uh, and other subjects will be more or less taboo, to like life and death and illness and age.

So I guess in [putting] it as part of that kind of teaching. Thus, the student was asked about that and just want to learn about it. So it's not like every time you bring something like this up, it's offensive to someone, but then at the same time, you have to be sensitive while teach, while teaching it.

[00:08:33] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Absolutely.

Okay. Many who witnessed the murder, described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:08:47] Elena Davidiak: I somewhat disagree with it because this was definitely not the first instance. It was maybe something that struck a lot of people more than the previous instances, but definitely it was not the first incident. Or um, um, the most glaring disregard for life, uh, unfortunately. So while I think it woke up, maybe

more people. It definitely was not the start of anything. It was, um, it brought to life issues that have been there before. You had to really not been paying attention to say this was the first, the first instance.

[00:09:34] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

I think, I mean too deep, a little go a little deeper with this. Um, there are many folks, uh, who lived through the civil rights movement in the fifties and the sixties. Uh, and in the media, they commented on this being likened to some of the stuff that they they saw or they experienced, um, in terms of this civil rights movement.

Uh, I think the thing that comes to mind a lot and, I'm not sure if you are familiar with the photograph of, I think it was in the fifties, a young Black man is he's backing up and the policemen is holding, um, a German shepherd dog. And that dog is lunging towards the young Black man. I don't know, I think it's, it's Birmingham, Alabama photograph.

And that photograph in, in American history, it was sort of a turning point for a lot of people who were not aware or were in denial of what was happening. Um, So a lot of them liken this photograph to what happened to George Floyd and that, and in terms of its significance is it was sort of a pivotal moment in American history because that's when people became more aware or could no longer deny it.

So when, I think when they're talking about this pivotal thing, it's something that they're aware, but they didn't want to deny it. And so George Floyd, this incident, um, was in accord, well, in alignment with that, as a parallel to that one.

What do you think about that?

[00:11:26] Elena Davidiak: Uh, I think it might be, um, this effect, this last straw effect.

In a way that at this point there's no way of denying things, but as you said, it's not probably so much that, uh, everyone was unaware, but as you said in denial would be a more appropriate term. I mean, it would be fairly hard, especially if you've lived here all your life, especially if you've lived in certain parts of the country to not be aware at all.

It's, uh, I think it's more of a reminder, we would like to have to think about those things as, um, things of the past. That picture dates back to the fifties, (coughs) excuse me. So, yes, we feel a little more comfortable looking at that because it's a, it's a, past, it's a past event. Uh, Ruby Bridges walking to school is a past event.

Oh, school's a desegregated now, but it's not that there is no segregation in schools and, uh, we're uncomfortable with seeing these things in the present. Uh, it's less disturbing seeing a black and white photo than seeing a video from a day ago.

[00:12:40] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right. There's more detail to that video. (talking over one another) (laughs)

[00:12:44] Elena Davidiak: And then it just tells us, uh, we, we pride ourselves on having evolved, but this means we have not.

So it's an uncomfortable moment.

[00:12:56] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right. Absolutely.

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

[00:13:08] Elena Davidiak: Uh, It's hard to stay very hopeful for humankind overall at this moment. And, uh, for any kind of development in terms of, um, xenophobia generally or racism, uh, in particular.

Uh, if, uh, does, uh, do anyone any good? It makes what I just said. It makes you feel uncomfortable enough that you start to think and maybe put yourself in that person's place. Can your life be taken just as easily. And unfortunately, uh, we do feel like human life. I feel like human life is being really devalued at this point, but also, um, it seems like in certain groups, it, um, you feeling as it can happen to anyone, but me.

It should not happen to me, but it might happen to others. So as long as people exclude themselves from being threatened by violence, it's, it will do them less good. It'll make them upset maybe, annoyed maybe, but it won't have a lasting effect. So it really depends on, um, what the implications are for the individual.

Aside from the structural changes that hopefully take place, but it seems like they're taking place very slowly for [now].

[00:14:35] Mona Ramonetti: Right.

Yeah, I think, uh, I think you touched upon something important there. I think we are. And I, I don't know if it's human nature where we are faced with a challenge and some resolution, quote/unquote, occurs.

And this challenge is now a thing of the past. Um, not there to be reexamined further. And the fact of the matter is all of these things are building upon each other. So we do need to revisit. Uh, we didn't need to re-examine. Um, and you know, the fact of the matter is this is, uh, this topic is incredibly uncomfortable for America and—

[00:15:26] Elena Davidiak: It should be.

[00:15:28] Mona Ramonetti: It should be, exactly. Exactly. It should be. And if there's comfort there, I'm not sure if we're doing the work correctly just yet.

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

[00:15:49] Elena Davidiak: Uh, as I think I said at the beginning, this is a learning moment or another learning process to me, uh, coming from a largely non-colored, um, ethnic group but at the same time, yes, everybody grew with their own share of um, prejudice, xenophobia, just a different shape of it, so, uh, we can all learn. I ha-, I'm learning. I have to admit, I have still to learn, but anybody can, anybody can become aware and, um, be open to learning.

[00:16:33] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Uh, this is a, this is an [unintelligible] question. You don't have to answer if you don't want to. Have you or someone, you know, been a victim of racial discrimination?

[00:16:47] Elena Davidiak: Uh, not me, but definitely people I know. Uh, and it was not. Uh, it was more subtle. It was not a life threatening, but definitely, yes. I have seen prejudice and, uh, a lack of respect or, um, preconceptions about someone based on the, look, the name, the sound of the name, the, the way they speak.

Definitely. Yes.

[00:17:22] Mona Ramonetti: And I know in some of the conversations that I have with people when it comes to this particular question, uh, excuse me, folks who have witnessed it, um, are not sure how to react in these instances. And it's a struggle. And then when, when they remove themselves from that and they have time to think about it, it seems like the general consensus is they feel guilty that they weren't able to do, they weren't able to react accordingly.

Um, have you experienced that? Have you witnessed that? Or, what are your thoughts on that, that particular, if you were part of that or you experienced that on—

[00:18:07] Elena Davidiak: It's not so much guilt. I would say my case bugs me, but more feeling, uh, that uh, feeling that I didn't, um, respond adequately or didn't feel it adequately at first.

As I said, I was somewhat innocent and I might have said something years ago. Uh, oh, maybe it's not so bad. These things have not happened to me. And then of course the legitimate answer would be, well, it did not happen to you because you don't look like I do. And you don't sound the way I do.

So, um, it's. Just being aware of your shortcomings and, um, making sure, you know, uh, they're there and, uh, working to overcome them and, uh, be behaving differently next time.

[00:18:58] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right. Because there will always be a next time and it's all—

[00:19:01] Elena Davidiak: Unfortunately there will be a next time, you know, there will be a next time. So you better know how to deal with that.

[00:19:09] Mona Ramonetti: But yeah, I mean, also I think it's even hard to predict how this will shape or to circumstances under which you'll be experiencing something like that. So as much as I think we, we try to, uh, prepare ourselves you know life is such that there's only so much we can do in the sense—

[00:19:33] Elena Davidiak: We can do though. We work in education. And this, I may one thing, uh, I'm fairly proud of. I made it a part of my, um, freshman seminar to speak about, um, varieties of English and the. Uh, vernacular variety and how people are bilingual essentially. So they use it with their families and their neighbors to fit in. But at the same time, they have to use standard English for the outside world, which may be their salvation sometimes.

There was an interview we looked at in class where a woman had just moved into a new neighborhood and her neighbor called the police on her. So she was moving in while Black and she believed that, uh, what might've prevented an attack on her was that she was speaking perfect academic standard English when they knocked on her door.

And these are things uncomfortable subjects that you need to bring up in your classroom to show, not just what side of things you're on, but also for your students to be some, to be aware of it than to speak about it and to really hear it from a firsthand account and for others to be able to share their experience.

So we do have discussions of those as well as just speaking about language and dialect. Uh, and these are discussions that they should have, even though they might be uncomfortable and I might be, but this is what we can do.

[00:21:05] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. Now are your students, when you, when you. Discuss these particular topics. How receptive are they?

[00:21:15] Elena Davidiak: They are receptive, uh, the uh freshmen students I had, um, maybe it's just a cohort I have at Stony Brook, which is very diverse. A lot of first-generation college students, a very ethnically diverse group. Um, but they have been very receptive and they have been willing to contribute to those discussions.

And I think they'll learn from them.

[00:21:40] Mona Ramonetti: Now these, these things that you implemented it in your class are, um, are you seeing more evidence of it, you know, amongst your colleagues as well? Or is it, you know, are you, are you existing in a vacuum? I'm not, I'm not quite sure the dynamics of, uh, you're in a how things flow on your end.

[00:21:59] Elena Davidiak: No, these are definitely being discussed in outside of class, but also in class by definition. Uh, it's a language department. So it would be more about the Spanish speakers, but there's a lot of, um, ethnic diversity within the, um, Spanish speaking population. And there's a lot of prejudice and that definitely is being addressed in a lot of all of courses.

[00:22:30] Mona Ramonetti: Um, very good. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

[00:22:37] Elena Davidiak: I think this, um, yeah, I, uh, it doesn't occur to me at the moment. I think that should be it unless you have any more questions.

[00:22:47] Mona Ramonetti: Um, no, I think we're, I think we're good. I think we've, um, you've given quite a rich perspective on things here. Um, so I'm going to go ahead and stop the tape or the recording right now.

[Recording stops]