

Stony Brook University

## Academic Commons

---

Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the  
Stony Brook University Community

Cultural Heritage Collections and Exhibits

---

4-12-2022

### Oral History Interview with Inel Lewis

Mona Ramonetti

mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu

Victoria Pilato

SUNY Stony Brook, victoria.pilato@stonybrook.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/racialunrest>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Ramonetti, Mona and Pilato, Victoria, "Oral History Interview with Inel Lewis" (2022). *Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community*. 14.

<https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/racialunrest/14>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Cultural Heritage Collections and Exhibits at Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community by an authorized administrator of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact [mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu](mailto:mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu), [hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu](mailto:hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu).

STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with  
Inel Lewis

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 Inel Lewis 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  
Libraries Digital Lab  
Narrator: Inel Lewis  
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti  
Session Number: One session  
Locations: Stony Brook, NY  
Date: April 12, 2022  
Pages: 12

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay, good afternoon. It's April 12th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Inel Lewis for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Inel, thank you for spending some time with us to tell us about your experiences. Okay. Can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:28] Inel Lewis: I'm the Director of Diversity Initiatives for the School of Medicine.

[00:00:31] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:38] Inel Lewis: The same day it occurred.

[00:00:41] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. What was your initial reaction to hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, or social media?

[00:00:52] Inel Lewis: Um, given the climate, um, with so much, so many hate crimes, um, going on in the country at that particular time, and it was so um, highly visible and, uh, publicized. Um, I was saddened by it.

[00:01:17] Mona Ramonetti: Anything else?

[00:01:18] Inel Lewis: Oh, I was saddened because it was an innocent Black man who lost his life—

[00:01:26] Mona Ramonetti: um-hm.

[00:01:30] Inel Lewis: —In a brutal attack.

[00:01:33] Mona Ramonetti: Yes. Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook university during this time?

[00:01:40] Inel Lewis: No.

[00:01:43] Mona Ramonetti: Um, may I ask why or why not?

[00:01:47] Inel Lewis: Well, I didn't see that where I worked had anything to do with, um, my personal beliefs, um, because when a Black man is attacked, I don't, and brutally killed, that's personal. That's not business. My job is my business.

[00:02:08] Mona Ramonetti: I see, a clear delineation, (coughs) excuse me.

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

[00:02:29] Inel Lewis: I think it was pivotal in the fact that it was, it was broadcasted, um, that it was highly visible, highly publicized. Um, but it was the first time I'd actually seen something like this done in my lifetime publicly. Whereas hate crimes have been committed privately. This was a very, very public display of hate.

Um, a very, very public display of murder, um, so, um— given the climate, I wasn't surprised about the outcome.

Um, having survived, uh, the 1967 riot in Detroit, having to, um, live in Los Angeles during the Rodney King riot. Um, I wasn't, I wasn't surprised about the outcome at all. I'm just, um, I'm, I'm just, I was surprised that these police officers allowed their deep hatred, that's what it was, it was deep hatred, um, to be so brutally and openly displayed, publicly displayed. They didn't care. They didn't care what they did and they didn't care that it was captured. They didn't care.

[00:04:08] Mona Ramonetti: So when you say you weren't surprised about the outcome you were referring to his murder.

[00:04:14] Inel Lewis: His murder, yeah, because when you have police officers who are trained to kill, what do you expect? They train they train police officers they train to kill. They don't train to wound they train, they train, they train to kill. So they were going to kill them. They weren't trying to hurt him. They're trying to kill him and they succeeded.

[00:04:40] Mona Ramonetti: So, was it pivotal, I think in your, (clears throat) your view, uh, in American history, this, his murder and the capturing the capturing of his murder, uh, on video, do you think it contributed to a pivotal moment in our history, or?

[00:05:05] Inel Lewis: And thinks, I mean, it did, it was like the Rodney King event. Um, it was, you know, people saw the looting after the fact, you know, after the verdict, they saw the looting and whatever, but, you know, we didn't—

This was, this was more visible. This was visible. So, it became a pivotal moment because it was highly visible. It allowed us to see exactly what occurred as opposed to other events in history that concerned, you know, brutal attacks on Blacks that were done quietly and in the background. And so that was hidden.

It was a hidden crime, hidden crimes, as opposed to this being, um, an overt crime. (Mona: um-hm) I want to say. So, yes, it was pivotal.

[00:05:50] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm.

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

[00:06:02] Inel Lewis: Well, it's been a couple of years. Um—

I don't, I don't know if there's any good that could come out of it. Because if you look at what happened January the 6th [ed. note: 2021], the capital, um, it was a clear cut case that racism is alive and well in the United States of America. So, you know, I don't—

I don't think any good will come out of this.

[00:06:35] Mona Ramonetti: What about, uh, you know, people are referencing the, the number of people who Black, white, uh, and, and, and all countri[buted], went out and protested, um, in numbers I don't think that we've seen in the United States in terms of our history. Oh, how do you view that in terms of how things are changing?

[00:07:04] Inel Lewis: I think that protests are good. You know, people can protest and say, you know, this is wrong, blah, blah, blah. But at the end of the day is how individuals treat other individuals. That's the bottom line. I can go out and I can protest all day long, but how am I going to treat my neighbor?

How am I gonna treat my white neighbor or my Black neighbor or, or my housekeeper or the teachers or whatever, especially when— you'd become angered about something because our gut reaction sometimes is to say things and do things that we may not, that, that, that they're triggers. Um, and so, um, somebody may call someone an inappropriate name and how are they gonna react to it? You know what I mean? When you're, when you're under fire.

I mean look at the Oscars. Look at the fact that Will Smith slap Chris Rock one, Black man, one wealthy, a whole high profile Black man slapped another high profile Black man in front of billions of people and didn't care because he was

provoked. So you look at other individuals, how, how do they react when they're provoked?

I have personally witnessed situations that I care not to revisit because individuals were provoked so we can protest all we want to. And this is, this is, uh, you know, "we hate violence, we hate racism," blah, blah, blah. But what if somebody provokes you and that person is near and dear to you or the person, a coworker, what happens then?

Because, you know, racism is a learned behavior. We're not born with this. It's a learned behavior. And, um, you know, I think protesting as well, but where did they go? What did they do? You know, some people ended up going to prison, but how is this going to change individual attitudes about treating your neighbor, being kind to one another, not seeing this?

I mean, this is an individual thing. This isn't a group thing. This is individuals, you know, people who who've been raised, um, to consider that, you know, Black people in this country, um, are not treated or not treated equally. You know? How do you, how do you, how do you figure that?

[00:09:35] Mona Ramonetti: So, and I'm trying to, to tie it back to the, and I understand exactly what you're saying. Um, Tying it back to, to George Floyd's murder and the events that followed, um, aside from the protest, did you witness or aware of a behavior that you are at your reference where there's, there's been a change in behavior in your own sphere? It could be Stony Brook or it could be outside of. Where things where, uh, your, your white friends, actually should say, because it, I mean, racism, we're not just talking Black and white here, but, uh, folks that you've associated with who are not Black, how have they changed in terms of, you know, how they speak to you, how they treat you, uh, any, have you noted anything?

[00:10:39] Inel Lewis: No, because the people I deal with whom are not Black, no better. I mean, you know what I mean? They, they know that I don't have any tolerance for stuff, and I'm not going to associate with, with anybody, whether they're black, white, purple, um, who isn't a kind individual. However, I've had instances in the past where I've had friends who are not Black and they've gotten angry at me in the first thing they've said was that N-word, the first thing come out, the mouth is N-word.

And, um, you know, I've been taken aback because I trusted that individual. I trust those individuals. I mean, I've been on a job. I was at an institution a where a high ranking individual, um, came very angry about, um, how I was advocating for a Black physician. And he came to my office and he said, "you n-" and he started off n- and he caught himself.

And he ran back to his office and I was, I was amazed. Um, and I left that department and I went to another department and I befriended someone who was white and we're buddies, we're pals. And the administration felt that we were too close and. I became persona non grata in that department. And I had to leave that department.

So I've, I've been on every part of that spectrum. You know, I've been the person who was trying to do their job, um, to advocate for people who look like me and for others to become angry and yell things. I've been on the end of where, um, I just wanted to have friends who didn't look like, but happened to be of a different gender.

And, uh, you know, it was a very difficult working situation. They made my life difficult because they thought that I was coupled up with this white man and I wasn't, we're just friends and, and they made my work life. Hell. Um, so. Um, the people who are in my life who uh who do not look like me, I'm very, no better.

They don't matter because, um, if I have any inclination that there's, there's an issue. They are no longer in my company. That's just the bottom line because I have no tolerance for that.

[00:13:19] Mona Ramonetti: So is it, uh, I, again, I'm hearing what you're saying and I, I can relate. A lot of what you're saying. Um, and so our solution is to what? To—

[00:13:38] Inel Lewis: I think it's an individual it's on an individual basis.

I don't think that we can. I, you know, I think that's protesting is great, but it's what you do at home. It's what you do when your job is, how do you speak to people? You treat them with dignity and respect. You know, and, and that's an individual thing that has to be done one person at a time. I just, you know, I just think this, these types of events sometimes bring out the absolute worst in people.

And it's unfortunate. It's unfortunate that, you know, white people brought, brought us from Africa and, you know, to put us in slavery. And, and then the stigma occurred that because we are brown, um, we're less than, you know, um, we don't have the same rights, you know, it's very hurtful. It's difficult that we have to try twice as hard to do the same job.

It's difficult that I can't, I don't want to walk down my street in Huntington because I feel uncomfortable walking down my street in Huntington, when I've earned the right to be in Huntington, you know, I've had people grab their purses. When I walked down the street.

[00:14:50] Mona Ramonetti: In 2022?



[00:14:52] Inel Lewis: In 2022. I'm walking down the street and you're holding onto your purse for dear life.

[00:15:01] Mona Ramonetti: So when you're, and I'm not looking to you for a solution, I know I'm just, I'm just trying to get a sense of how do we work with what we have here. You said, you know, it starts with the individual—

[00:15:15] Inel Lewis: Right.

[00:15:16] Mona Ramonetti: —But if there isn't, there are very many individuals together, a group who act a certain way that is not pleasing to many in terms of, of their behavior, as it, as it relates to race. How do we reach that individual to change that behavior?

[00:15:41] Inel Lewis: I don't know the answer to that one, Mona. I don't know the answer to that one. I, um, all I can do is be decent and kind, you know, um—

I think, I think it has happen one person at a time. Um, but unfortunately, uh, people surprise you. You know, you think that they are genuine and they're kind, and they're, they're receptive. And then sometimes you find out that those you trust the most are the ones who stab you in the back. Um, the ones who have the most hatred, and it comes out. I've seen it. That's it.

At another institution, the person who recruited me to work with diversity, the white man who recruited me to work with diversity issues., is the one, almost called me and the doctor, the N-word.

[00:16:38] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm. So in instances, when you are faced with this, uh, where you're surprised by someone close to you, who clearly is disappointing you in this manner, how do you, how do you deal with it? I know you said that person was longer no longer in your life, but in the moment, can you offer into some insight and as to how you can deal with that or how you've dealt with it?

[00:17:12] Inel Lewis: I said I've left. Well, when it happened in the departments, I left the departments. Um, both of them. Um, personally it's occurred. I mean, someone was immensely close to me, um, got angry and called me the N-word. And all I can remember was my mother always saying, one day, he's going to call you the N-word. And it sure, it sure happened. So I don't, he got mad and call me the N-word, so, oh no, this person will never do that to me. This person will never say that to me. And the person did, the person did.

Um, So, you know, and the person's not in my life. Because I just—

I have no—

[00:18:06] Mona Ramonetti: And those particular instances, do you turn and walk away or do you say, look and I'll come on

[00:18:11] Inel Lewis: Oh, I don't rationalize anything, you say what you say, because what comes out of your mouth is from your heart.

[00:18:18] Mona Ramonetti: Hmmm. Um-hm, um-hm.

[00:18:22] Inel Lewis: Generally when people in anger and fits of anger, what is in your heart comes out of your mouth. And so when people have said those things or attempted to say those things, that's in your heart, that's deep rooted. If that's the first thing you say, when you're angry, professionally, personally, whatever that's you!

There's no. Oh, I know. Oh no, that's what you meant. Then you don't need to have me in your life now. You don't need to have me working here when you don't have. No. And I just went to the next, because it was it's with anybody, anybody, as my mother says her, and as Maya Angelou said, people tell you who they are when they tell you they are believe them.

Tell you who they are, believe them. And so when, um, people said these things to me, I believe him and I don't, I don't stick around because I don't have to stick around. I don't have to, I don't have to subject myself to any of that anymore. Ever.

[00:19:31] Mona Ramonetti: What would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you've experienced as it relates to, to the George Floyd murder and events thereafter.

[00:19:42] Inel Lewis: Um, well, I can give you this. So, so two weeks ago I was followed by the Huntington police. I was driving home from church and I was followed by the police. They trailed me, they followed me for two miles. And, um—

[00:20:02] Mona Ramonetti: Well clear, you ran the stop stoplight or a stop sign you know, now, come on. (laughs)

[00:20:06] Inel Lewis: Uh, they followed me, they were following me. (Mona laughs) They were following me. I know what follow me look like because it happened in another city in New York, on long (Mona: yup) island. They were trailing me. It was at 10 o'clock at night. And so my attitude now is, uh,

Hmm,

because I, I got pulled over when I lived in another city.

I trailed if you did the plates and the whole nine yards, and I was on my way on my way to church. And so, um, I'm very cautious anytime I see a police car it has, it has absolutely traumatized me. George Floyd has absolutely traumatized me because anytime I see a police car now, I just get terrified. Not about protection. It's about driving while Black.

[00:21:07] Mona Ramonetti: Hmm.

[00:21:11] Inel Lewis: Terrified.

[00:21:12] Mona Ramonetti: Yes,

[00:21:15] Inel Lewis: Because if they'll do that to a Black, Black man, being Black doesn't matter. They'll do it to a Black woman, that do it to an older Black woman, will do it to a younger Black, won't matter, it won't matter. It doesn't matter. It's just Black. (Mona: yes) So, yes, anytime I see a cop car now, my antennas go right up and I become very cautious.

In fact, I just had my car serviced and I told them to make sure the lights worked, everything worked and, um, he said well your brake light is out. I said, make sure you fix it. So I got my brake light fixed right before I had an incident. I saw the cops. If, if, if that brake now that's all I thought about was thank God I got my brake light fixed because they would have pulled me over. (Mona: um-hmm)

They would have Pulled Me Over.

[00:22:10] Mona Ramonetti: Is there anything else you'd like to add to that question in terms of how, what you would like folks to know about, about this time?

[00:22:23] Inel Lewis: It's, it's. In 2022 it is horrible that as a person of color that I always have to be on high alert. I have to be high alert on my job. I have to be on high alert in the supermarket.

I have to be on high alert when I'm driving, I have to be high alert when I'm walking. I have to be constantly on high alert in 2022

Shopping while Black, eating while Black, walking, while Black, working while Black. Living while Black.

[00:23:06] Mona Ramonetti: It's exhausting.

[00:23:08] Inel Lewis: It's—Yes, it is.

[00:23:09] Mona Ramonetti: It's tiring.

[00:23:11] Inel Lewis: It is, but it's life because you never know how someone's going to react. You never know what somebody's going to do. You never know what someone's going to say. You just don't know. So if anything what the George Floyd incident did was it just elevated that sense of fear of being an African-American in the United States.

[00:23:34] Mona Ramonetti: Hmm— thank you for that really, really honest answer.

Um,

I know you, you've spoken about how you've been a victim of racial discrimination. Um, can you expand on that in terms of, uh, if there's someone that you know, that has been outside of, well, th th that has experienced this as well. Just if you'd like to share a few more examples.

[00:24:04] Inel Lewis: Oh it's it's. You know, I've been passed up for, for promotions and given promotion, the promotion game went to someone who was less qualified than me. In fact, I had a college degree and the person had high school diploma and the person was put over me as my supervisor.

[00:24:26] Mona Ramonetti: How recent was that?

[00:24:29] Inel Lewis: Pardon?

[00:24:30] Mona Ramonetti: How recent was that?

[00:24:31] Inel Lewis: Oh, that was a, that was a while ago, but it's still, but the memory still lingers (Mona: yes, absolutely) because I had to, and then I asked to be transferred to another department since I wasn't going to be promoted. And I was laid off as punishment.

[00:24:48] Mona Ramonetti: (Deep breath) Hmmm.

[00:24:50] Inel Lewis: I was the only one in the department who was laid off. So I was being punished. And I knew it. And it's okay. Because I applied for another position, which was a higher position.

[00:25:05] Mona Ramonetti: So, Inel I'm going to ask you, how are you feeling now? I mean, I know what I'm seeing and I know what I'm hearing. Uh, can you describe in a few sentences what you're feeling right now in terms of sitting here answering these questions?

Um, Anger, fear, sadness?

[00:25:30] Inel Lewis: Sadness. I'm not angry anymore. You know, I mean, I was angry when I was younger because these things were happening and, and like, what? You know, why did I get bypassed for a position when I was far more qualified when I prove it myself, blah, blah, blah. And then the Caucasian woman with a high school diploma gets it.

Why am I, you know, scrutinized for having a friendship with a white male? You know, I mean, because how it happened was that I was given an award from the department for my work, for my work. And then they hired this white male in the department and we became buddies. We took familiar with each other.

We're laughing too much. We're too comfortable with one another. And the next thing I'm being called into the administrator's office because I'm a problem. How do you go from, receiving an award and a thousand dollar, you know, uh, you know, award, to being a problem? Oh, I see what the problem is. The problem is the white male that, you know, I go to lunch with, we're friends, we're neighbors, but I'm that Black woman who was having lunch with that white male.

So, so I'm not angry. I'm no longer angry about it. I'm just, I'm just sad that it's, you know, or even when someone makes a snarky remark about the fact, well, you know, she, she does all right. Someone made them remark because it got back to me. Someone made a remark. Well, she does all right. Look at her. Look how she dresses.

Look at those pearls she wears.

You're kidding me? Because I'm a Black woman and I wear pearls.

[00:27:21] Mona Ramonetti: OK.

[00:27:28] Inel Lewis: So I'm just, I'm just, I'm over it. How about that? I'm just over it.

[00:27:33] Mona Ramonetti: What do you mean when you say

[00:27:36] Inel Lewis: I'm just—

[00:27:37] Mona Ramonetti: hang on, Inel because I think we have some, some back, I have some background stuff that's coming through.

[00:27:41] Inel Lewis: If just, I'm done—

[00:27:44] Mona Ramonetti: One moment

Sorry about that, Inel.

[00:28:09] Inel Lewis: No problem.

[00:28:10] Mona Ramonetti: So when you say you're done with it, what—

[00:28:12] Inel Lewis: I'm just, you know, it's, it's like racism will always be here and you know, it's not going anywhere. Do I have friends who are white? Well, absolutely, I adore. Absolutely I do. They love me. I love them. But the unfortunate part about that is, is that I also, I also have to keep a safe, a safe distance.

I don't get too engaged because I don't want anybody flipping on me and calling me out of my name.

And that's my reality that I have to keep safe distance from my white friends, because I don't want them flipping on me. I don't want some, I, you know, um, I don't, I'm not around people when they drink, because I don't want somebody to slip up, drink, slip up and say something inappropriate. Cause I've been in that type of environment as well.

So I just, um, I have to be guarded, I have to be guarded.

[00:29:23] Mona Ramonetti: When do you ever let your guard down then?

[00:29:26] Inel Lewis: Never!

[00:29:28] Mona Ramonetti: Have you ever let your guard down, Inel?

[00:29:31] Inel Lewis: Once. I let it down once and I got called in an NB.

Let it, let it down once again. And I got called an N [N-word] at my job by the person who hired me because I was defending a Black physician. So I've let my guard down, but not anymore because I trusted. Oh, you can't be like everybody else. Yes you can be, when provoked. So the guard will never let be let down again. (Mona: hmmm)

Ever.

[00:30:11] Mona Ramonetti: Hmm. Okay. Well that, those are that those are end of my questions or that's the end of my questions. Um, Is there anything else you'd like to share before we stop the recording?

[00:30:25] Inel Lewis: (whispering) Nooo

[00:30:27] Mona Ramonetti: Well, I thank you. (Inel laughs) I do. This is, I appreciate your honesty, your candor. I think it's, uh, important for your voice to be heard amongst the many voices that are contributing to this project. So I really do appreciate it. Thank you. And I'm going (Inel: You're welcome) to stop the recording now.

[00:30:51] Inel Lewis: Okay.

[Recording stops]