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

Cultural Heritage Collections and Exhibits

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Oral History Interview with Aruna Balasubramanian

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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COMMUNITY DIGITAL PROJECT

Oral History Interview with
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Stony Brook University Libraries Digital Projects

Stony Brook University

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PREFACE

The following oral history interview transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Aruna Balasubramanian conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 25, 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.

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[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Very good. Uh, it is April 25th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Aruna Balasubramanian for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences From Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Aruna thank you for spending the time to tell us about your experiences and we'll get started. Can you tell us how you were affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:31] Aruna Balasubramanian: Um, I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Computer Science. Um, I have been teaching and doing research since 2015. I joined as an assistant professor and I got tenure and promotion in 2021.

[00:00:46] Mona Ramonetti: Very good. Congrats.

When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:56] Aruna Balasubramanian: Um, I think that I heard it on Twitter. Like I, uh, so there was a lot of outrage on Twitter and I wasn't sure what was going on. And so I looked up the news and I don't remember the exact date. I probably the day that it happened or maybe the next day, I don't remember, especially when the video came out.

Um, I think that that was when, uh, I mean up until the video I think I, I heard about it, but then we've been hearing about so many news, like of racial, uh, injustice from before as well. For example, like Treyvon Martin and, and all of these. Uh, and so, uh, when I first heard it, I was like, oh my goodness, another case.

And then I saw the video and I was like, wow, this is, uh, somehow even, I don't know. I don't know why. Even closer to home, just watching that video, I think—

[00:01:53] Mona Ramonetti: What do you mean a closer to home?

[00:01:55] Aruna Balasubramanian: Because, I don't know. I think it's different to different when you just feel it about something, then actually watch something happen.

Um, you can hear it about like injustice and then you see it and just affects you a completely different way, I think.

[00:02:10] Mona Ramonetti: Right. There was something about that video and I think that most people, um, they commented on it. And it's along in the same vein that it you're saying there was something different—

[00:02:23] Aruna Balasubramanian: Yes.

[00:02:24] Mona Ramonetti: —that was captured in that video. What was your initial reaction to hearing about and or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, social media.

[00:02:40] Aruna Balasubramanian: For me, it was a lot of sadness.

Outrage also, but mostly sadness that, that it this, this kind of racial injustice was still happening and, and it's just happening regularly on like, there doesn't seem to be any way of, I feel like there's the sadness was because every time something like this happens there's outrage and then it happens again and then there's outrage again, and then this happens again.

It just seems like, okay, what can we do to stop this? Like when is this going to end? How long is this going to keep happening?

[00:03:28] Mona Ramonetti: When you say outrage, can you expand on that a little bit?

[00:03:33] Aruna Balasubramanian: So, I mean, I, like I said, it was sadness for me because I've been outraged over and over again, and it doesn't seem to like lead to anything.

Um, just the fact that, you know, a free person today in 2020, in 2020, this happened, but in 2020 that somebody can be affected like this in broad daylight. And it's shocking right, like, how can this happen? How can this be let to happen? Like, what are we doing? How that was, I guess that was the outrage.

[00:04:12] Mona Ramonetti: Yes. Yes.

Almost the sense of powerlessness to that. It just keeps happening and, there doesn't seem to be a viable solution just yet.

[00:04:25] Aruna Balasubramanian: Yes. And, yeah, I, yeah, that's, I think that was, that was my main, uh, main feeling at that time. Then the sadness that this is just

seems to be happening again. We is, yeah, exactly what you said, which is powerlessness.

[00:04:42] Mona Ramonetti: Yep.

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

[00:04:52] Aruna Balasubramanian: You mean the administration?

[00:04:54] Mona Ramonetti: Uh, anyone, admin, uh, within your department, colleagues, outside of, students, uh, that you know, anyone affiliated with Stony Brook.

[00:05:04] Aruna Balasubramanian: So I did talk to my students the next day about this. Um, I think mostly I was concerned because things were already like, we were still not meeting in person and, you know, there was still already students were feeling a little bit a disconnect. Uh, and when I say students, I mean my PhD students, um, so I wanted to talk to them about this, to see how they're processing this news and how it was affecting them. Uh, that was one thing I did.

The other thing, uh, was that, so I, uh, I am the chair of the diversity committee at Stony Brook, uh, computer science department. And one of the reasons that we formed this committee was because we had poor representation from many, many, um, demographics in computer science, but the reason it started was we got funding from an organization called National, uh, Council for Women In Technology (NCWIT). And they wanted to, wanted us to look at why we had so few women in the, in the department and, and this is not a, this is not a problem just for computer scientists, it's a problem everywhere.

Um, but, uh, especially in engineering. And so, so we've been doing a lot of work and as part of that work, I started a diversity committee. And when this news came out, somehow, I'm a little bit ashamed even to say this, but somehow it's struck me that it's not like, yes, we want to improve diversity in terms of women, but there also lack of diversity in other areas, there aren't that [many] Black people in the department, the representation is very small compared to the national.

Um, you know, if you look at what the demographics is in America and same for Latinex community. So I, I actually brought this up with the diversity committee. To expand our scope beyond, uh, and at that time we were focusing on women, mainly because we had, we got funding from this agency and we were like working on that, but then we decided that we want to expand this to other underrepresented minority as well.

Um, and we got in touch with this group called ColorStack, which is a new organization, uh, for Black engineers in computer sciences. They have a chapter in Stony Brook. Um, we, uh, we started talking to them to understand, like, you know, are the things that we are doing in general is that also applicable because different minority communities are different.

We can't expect to do one thing and expect that, you know, this whole problem is going to go away. Um, and we also started looking much more carefully at our data to have a sense for like how many students are applying, how many students are we accepting? How many students are we retaining from underrepresented communities like women, African-American, um, Hispanics, uh, Latinex and, and, and a few and others as well.

Um, you know, um, dis disabled and so on and so forth. So that's something that. So that's how I start. The first thing I did was send an email to the diversity committee group and so that we can start discussing about this. I was actually ready. I don't know why it suddenly just spurred me to do this because, um, I, I, like I said, there's not other things happening also before this, but somehow, um, I guess it just for me to do this, so we started doing, or at least started looking at the data much more carefully to figure out what we can do to improve the diversity in the department.

[00:08:42] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. And so, but the findings that you, you got, what did you do? Did you present it to your department, uh, with some possible solutions or suggestions?

[00:08:55] Aruna Balasubramanian: Yes.

So we are, um, to what we did was we did two things. One of them was that we got a grant. I was actually writing this grant, funnily enough, about the same time as, uh, as, uh, when this was happening.

And so at that time, like I said, we discussed with the diversity committee and then I decided to include, to expand the grant to include other under represented minority as well. So we wrote a grant, we got funding for it, and we have been doing a few things. At this point, what we are doing still.

Okay. So, two things happened. One is we got this grant and this grant is in it's much more general and it's not targeting one specific group. Uh, it's it's targeting all under represented minority. And what we are trying to do is to, first of all, include the pedagogy, because what we found was we're seeing a lot of retention problems. Students, um, in their first year, they seem to drop out even after coming to the computer science major.

Um, this could be because of many reasons, but one of the reasons is definitely, and this is also known, uh, is that because students, um, who see who maybe, uh, under-prepared in terms of computer science may feel left out or have an imposter syndrome when they join, they may think that they don't belong there and people that are around them know more than they do.

And so they tend to drop out. Um, and so we started the year overhauling the curriculum for the lower division classes. Um, and we're also making, we are actually, we ran an inclusivity program with our TAs, our teaching assistants, um, so that they know that students come from different backgrounds and being inclusive is extremely important and what they should do to be inclusive.

Um, And why it's important. So we did that. And then, um, and so, oh, the other thing we did was also to expand our summer offerings because a lot of the times students, um, if let's say that they don't do well during the school year, they can actually take the summer class to make up for it. However, they were not able to do that before, because we were not offering that many summer courses.

And so we overhauled our summer offerings, like made it more attractive to faculty to actually offer summer programs uh, summer classes. Um, before it was just, it was not worth the time to offer them. So, so they're the few things that we've been doing. Um, so that was a part number, part one. Part two is, I'm not completely satisfied with what we're doing, because I think what we, we're doing a lot of things, I think, which I'm happy with, but I feel like we also need to do, be more targeted.

Um, because we, so for example, I have been doing a lot of work towards improving the number of the representation of women in computer science. And I do this because I also have like, you know, some experience of my own, which I can bring to, uh, to, forth. What I've been asking the department is that we need to do something like that for the other communities as well.

However, we are not able to find this one person who can actually take charge. Uh, and so we haven't been able to do more targeted, um, find out exactly, like do a focus group among students from different underrepresented minority groups and ask them, what it is that, what, what would be, here are something general that we are doing?

What is it that, that is problematic for you specifically? Uh, or, and so that is something that I, we haven't done and I haven't found anybody to do this. Maybe I will, um, in some time, once we, uh, you know, many of these things that we've started actually, once they sort of take um take shape and I have more time.

Um, so that's something that I, I, I feel like we should be doing that we haven't been doing.

[00:13:03] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So am I understanding this correctly that you have gone to students and within your department to solicit feedback and suggestions as to how—

[00:13:15] Aruna Balasubramanian: We haven't, we want to.

[00:13:16] Mona Ramonetti: —would like to,

Ok. And so you're, you're trying to basically figure out how to do it.

[00:13:23] Aruna Balasubramanian: Basically figured out how to do it, right. And basically who should be the right person to do this. So for example, I, I did this, uh, for, uh, the, uh, the women students in the department. Um, right? And I am saying, Am I the right person to do this for, um, other groups? So, like I said, I am, um, international. I don't have as much experience or knowledge about the history of racial injustice in this country.

I only know what I've seen since I've come here. And I feel like somebody with a much better background could be, would be better to lead this. So I've been trying to find somebody in the department I've sent like emails and talk to people. I haven't yet, so it may be that I'll do it anyway, but—

[00:14:11] Mona Ramonetti: And are you the lone person forging ahead with this, or is this an endeavor that the diversity committee has undertaken?

[00:14:18] Aruna Balasubramanian: This is, so the other things that I discussed, like the pedagogy and the, uh, that is definitely something that a group of us are doing. Um, uh, as part of a grant that we got for from the Center for Inclusive Computing.

Um, the chair of the department, Samir Das are very involved in this and, uh, and he's also involving like the deans and the, uh, the vice president for diversity and then so on. So that we can. Uh, like Judi Clarke [ed. note: Dr. Judith Brown Clarke] (Dr. Judith Brown Clarke is the Vice President for Equity & Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer for Stony Brook University and Health System) has come spoken to us, our group, the smaller group that is doing much of this work. Um, this specific, uh, work about the focus group.

This is something that I have been pushing forward, but I haven't gotten a lot of traction. I think one of the reason is because I think people want to say, okay, let's try this, everything they're doing and see how things go. But, um, but I do think that this is something that I would—

—let me put it this way. Everybody wants to do it, but nobody's taken the initiative yet.

[00:15:21] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right. It's a, it's a heavy lift. (laughter) Okay. Um, many who witnessed actually, when we, uh, stop the recording, I'll follow up with that. That w what'd you just discussed? I might have a couple of suggestions.

[00:15:39] Aruna Balasubramanian: Ok, yes, absolutely.

[00:15:41] Mona Ramonetti: Many who have witnessed the murder describe it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:15:56] Aruna Balasubramanian: I think, yes. I agree with that sentiment and, and I agree. I, I least I felt that way, um, and going by the number of protests that were going on, um, I think. I think many things might have happened at the same time that has caused this, this being a pivotal moment. One was just, just like I said, just the act itself was terrible.

The fact that the person died under such bad conditions was terrible. But then I think it was at the same time politically, the country was going through some things at that time. I feel. In 2020, um, it was an election year. Uh, and, and I think the whole COVID and being isolated also made people realize how important, you know, human, human contact is, uh. And I think all of these put together made this a pivotal moment. Uh, before this actually the way I felt that I felt I felt outrage and just the feeling of helplessness during the Trayvon Martin case.

Um, I remember. Um, but I think that this one was maybe, uh, the reason it became pivotal I feel is because of all the other external factors that also said that at the same time.

[00:17:20] Mona Ramonetti: What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:17:34] Aruna Balasubramanian: I don't know. I think— I mean, I would want to have said that, oh, uh, racial injustice and peace in people's minds, much more forefront than maybe it was before. And, and, uh, and maybe, you know, the, the country will move towards, okay, how do we heal and make sure these things don't happen again, but I'm not seeing that right now.

Um, what, what I'm seeing is like, there was a lot of activity happening immediately after which I appreciate. And I think many of us have, uh, it has opened our eyes to these blind spots, I think, um, which is very important. Um, but as the, as a country, are we moving towards more racial justice somehow?

I'm not seeing that.

Yeah. I hope I am wrong. But—

[00:18:37] Mona Ramonetti: Why do you think that is? I mean, and that's a tough question, but if you could take a stab at it.

[00:18:45] Aruna Balasubramanian: Why do I think that is?

I don't know. I don't really know.

[00:18:58] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

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

[00:19:07] Aruna Balasubramanian: In terms of the—

[00:19:09] Mona Ramonetti: The murder. Of the murder and the events surrounding the murder.

[00:19:19] Aruna Balasubramanian: I would like people to know that this can happen to anyone. And that everybody, including the citizens, the law enforcement agencies, the politicians need to work together to make sure that something like this it's much more and more hard for something like this to happen. Um, right? And the thing is that I actually don't believe in defunding the police.

Um, I don't think that that's the right approach to take. Um, I don't see that working. However, things can't be the status quo. That's not possible either. So I think everybody should come together to figure out what, what. I feel like right now, somehow there's two extremes, there's either defund the police or don't do anything, neither of which I think is going to do much.

We need, we need a, a different approach to this. Um, so that's what I, yeah.

[00:20:36] Mona Ramonetti: Uh, what do you think of Stony Brook University's response to and commitment to anti-racism right now? And any thoughts on that?

[00:20:58] Aruna Balasubramanian: I think that, that the school should do more. Um, maybe. For example, actually, maybe I just don't know who to talk to about this, right? But, uh, I feel like maybe we should have more forums that let us talk about, um, you know, students from under-represented minority, how they feel, um, maybe have it on the front page.

This is like, what you're doing is great, but, but, uh, you know, what if you can just put it on the front page on the Stony Brook website, This is what our students are talking about. Um, to bring and to bring like, you know, to all of us to bring this to a

forefront, Oh, this is how our students are suffering. Um, something like that would be good, I think.

Um, have a more open discussion about what, what others who are more affected than I am feel or feel about this would be very useful for me.

[00:21:57] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah, I think that's an excellent idea. I think more often than not, we seem to forget that the students, (laughs) without the students, we won't be here, that the students are on the receiving end of, of our goods essentially.

And yet there's such an untapped resource for a lot of things that we're trying to get accomplished.

[00:22:20] Aruna Balasubramanian: Yes.

[00:22:21] Mona Ramonetti: So I think you're onto some, and I know there are a number of entities on campus that, you know, do realize that, but I think more so I think we need to remember that and, and really take advantage of the voices, the power of the information, the feedback that students can provide us.

Have you or someone you know, been the victim of racial discrimination?

[00:22:55] Aruna Balasubramanian: Not—So—I, one more thing that happened after, during this, uh, George Floyd's, uh, sad case was that I was talking to a friend and he told me, and he's African American, and he told me something that I hadn't even thought about. He told me that since he was six years old, his parents have taught him how to behave if a police officer comes in front of him.

And he told me that this was not a big deal, every single Black male child, their parents probably do this. Call me naive. I was complete. I, this is not something that even crossed my mind that this is actually a thing. Um, it is shocking beyond belief. I have an eight year old at that time. I don't know she's older, but just like thinking about saying something like this to my child, it's just, that actually shook me probably as much as the actual, um, death of George Floyd itself.

Um, to be honest. Um, that a child has to be taught this. Uh, so, so in that sense, I have, I didn't feel that about the cases like this, but, you know, I talked to the friends and they tell me, and that's always shocking. Uh, but apart from that, in my own case, I mean, I've had people scream at me about go back to your country kind of thing, but, uh, nothing more than that.

[00:24:24] Mona Ramonetti: That's a lot.

(both laugh) That's quite a bit. (laughs) I'm sorry. And, uh, I when, when people share their stories with me, it's, it's really, uh, it's still shocking that you know this behavior is still, people are still carrying on with this type of behavior. Um, You know, I think that's it for the questions. I have a few more, but I think, I think we'll stop here.

Uh, is there anything else you'd like to share before we cut the recording?

[00:25:04] Aruna Balasubramanian: Um, I think this is a great thing that you're doing actually, I'm sort of reliving those. Like it's, it's been a while and I, you know, talking about this again, so sort of bringing it, all those memories back. Um, and, and I'm glad that this.

I think school should advertise this more and, uh, and bring this to people's forefront. Um, I know that, uh, at least from speaking to Judi Clarke and, uh, and then we are doing, uh, we want to do a lot of things about, uh, about just improving diversity, but I think we should also do more about racial injustice and, and you know, what we can do about those as well.

You know, making sure that we have good representation in school and we are providing, we are being, um, inclusive. I think this other part about, um, bringing racial injustice, like I, people are aware of it, but then they tend to forget. So, uh, to reiterate, I think the useful thing,

[00:26:06] Mona Ramonetti: Especially when it's not hitting home on a daily basis.

[00:26:09] Aruna Balasubramanian: That's right,

[00:26:10] Mona Ramonetti: And you know, it's, it's really not part of a lot of people's reality.

Um, and I'm not saying that it's, it's something that should be at the forefront all the time, but for, for many members, um, from underrepresented communities or groups, that's their daily reality. (Aruna: yeah) And I think we need to be mindful of that.

Okay. Alright, I am going to stop the recording. Thank you so much Aruna.

[Recording stops]