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Oral History Interview with Jennasia Otway

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with
Jennasia Otway

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 Jennasia Otway conducted by Mona Ramonetti on May 3, 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: Jennasia Otway
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
Date: May 3, 2022
Pages: 10

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Good afternoon. It is May 3rd, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Jennasia Otway for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences From the Stony Brook University Digital Project. Jennasia, thank you so much for spending time to tell us about your experiences. Can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:28] Jennasia Otway: I am a senior at Stony Brook University. I'm studying Health Science. And I also work at the Library Dean's Office.

[00:00:37] Mona Ramonetti: Very good. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:46] Jennasia Otway: Um, I remembered it was during the pandemic. It was during the summertime, and I had just woken up. And I was talking to, a friend and they sent me, they, they were kinda telling me about the situation and how it was all over the, like Instagram, in the news and stuff.

[00:01:11] And, I saw the video on Instagram. And. It was—to me personally, it wasn't—it should have been surprising, but it wasn't for me. And it just felt like, it just felt like, something I've seen going, like happening more on and on again so, that was like my first impression of it, the day it happened and. Yeah.

[00:01:45] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:01:48] What was your initial reaction to hearing about it and or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, and social media? You've talked about it a little bit, but if you can, expand a bit, that'd be great.

[00:01:59] Jennasia Otway: Yeah. Um, I would say my reaction was a little bit desensitized, and it's just. It's something that you see happen so frequently that, you know, you don't really expect for the next time to be any different.

[00:02:18] Um, and I say I was desensitized because I've seen something similar happen to another individual that was also on social media. And that kind of like, it

kind of really just. Shocked me and, the way it happened, it shocked me so when I saw the video, it, I was a little desensitized by it. And I also was a little bit taken aback by how, there was, there was no mercy shown in that video.

[00:02:55] So, that was my initial reaction to it.

[00:03:01] Mona Ramonetti: What do you mean by "no mercy?"

[00:03:04] Jennasia Otway: Just by how like, George Floyd, he cried out for nine straight minutes, and the guy—and the police officer didn't release, his knee from his, his neck, until he, until he was unconscious, that that's what I mean by no mercy like, he's crying out for his mother and, the police officer didn't even like, show any like.

[00:03:32] You know, any type of remorse for, for him, seeing how he can't breathe and how he's like basically fighting for air, fighting for his life. He release his knee until he, was unconscious.

[00:03:50] Mona Ramonetti: At any moment, did you cry, when you saw this?

[00:03:54] Jennasia Otway: Um, I didn't. I feel like I've watched a video a few times. Like, back and forth, but I didn't really cry—it's just like, I was kind of just taken aback by, by the whole situation.

[00:04:15] Mona Ramonetti: Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:04:22] Jennasia Otway: Um, I did not specifically, but I am a part of a, an organization on campus called Black Women's Association, and we kinda like, you know, we put out a message on social media that, towards what happened, in basically like, a part of like a protest that they were having on social media, that was a part of like the Black Lives Matter movement.

[00:04:52] So we kind of just put out a little message, saying that, you know, justice needs to be served and all of that, so. That's my own, that's the only type of interaction I had with Stony Brook during the time, which was through my club on campus.

[00:05:10] Mona Ramonetti: Uh, can you give me a sense of, or give us a sense of when that statement was crafted?

[00:05:18] How soon after his murder was it crafted?

[00:05:22] Jennasia Otway: Um. I would say around Juneteenth, I believe.

[00:05:27] Mona Ramonetti: So, a few weeks later.

[00:05:29] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:05:30] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:05:36] And was it, was it, did you folks collectively, did you meet and decide that this, statement needed to be made or was this an initiative of one and then it was brought to the larger group?

[00:05:49] Jennasia Otway: I would say it was an initiative of one, the president, and it was brought to like our e-board members, which I was on the e-board at the time.
[Mona: um-hm]

[00:05:58] So it was brought to us as a collective and we all worked on it individually to put it out.

[00:06:06] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So how, how soon after his death, did your president, send out this motion or this request to, to craft a statement?

[00:06:20] Jennasia Otway: Um, I would say like the week of Juneteenth?

[00:06:26] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:06:27] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:06:28] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:06:33] Many who witnessed the murder described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:06:44] Jennasia Otway: Um, I agree, just because like, I feel like witness—people, like witnessing the video, actually, like, people who weren't aware of, like how problematic the, police brutality is, I feel like watching that video, and like, having all of this protest and all of this attention added towards it, helped, open a lot of people's minds up, and. And it seemed like it helped them realize the problem that, that we're facing in our country. A lot of people who, you know, who aren't, a person of color, they seem to, that I've spoke with in the past, they seem to, you know, back up Black, the Black matters, the Black Lives Matter movement, and they seem to like, want to be in support of it. So it's not something I've seen before George Floyd, but I feel like after the protest, after everything that people

tried to, bring attention to, I feel like after that, it's, I've definitely seen a change in, in, our community and stuff like that.

[00:07:58] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So this change that you witnessed, or these various changes, I guess in attitude and awareness, um, is it—two years—it's almost two years now. Are these changes still in place or is this something that was immediate and then, there was a reversion back to status quo prior to, his murder?

[00:08:25] Jennasia Otway: Um, I would say I've seen the change be consistent but, I can't say if it's still there. I just like, that's what I've witnessed around that time period. And the sentencing of the police officer I've seen, that's definitely shows that it was a pivotal change in history because a police officer has never been sentenced, a sentence with such a, like a long sentence for killing a Black man, so. You know, I see that as a change. 'Cause, before in the past, like Trayvon Martin or, um, never—they got off free basically. And this police officer, he was actually sentenced so I see that as a pivotal change, even though people may not, feel like it's the sentence he deserved, it's still a start.

[00:09:23] Mona Ramonetti: I see. What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:09:36] Jennasia Otway: Um. More unity? Like I feel like after the murder and people realize how problematic police brutality is, I've seen how more unified the country's become like through protests and stuff like that. So I'm hoping like, that, I hope that they become more. Um, I hope that there's much more unity because I mean, we still have a far way to go, in terms of like us working together to stop such a problem that we've been facing for a while.

[00:10:13] And, um, yeah.

[00:10:22] Mona Ramonetti: What would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

[00:10:29] Jennasia Otway: Um. I—could I ask a question or?

[00:10:38] Mona Ramonetti: Would you like me to ask it ask it again?

[00:10:40] Jennasia Otway: No, I was asking, could I ask a question like—

[00:10:43] Mona Ramonetti: —Sure, go ahead.

[00:10:44] Jennasia Otway: Do you mean like in terms of the George Floyd, um, death or do you mean like racism or?

[00:10:51] Mona Ramonetti: We can, we can start with George Floyd.

[00:10:53] Jennasia Otway: Okay. Um, I personally feel like it hasn't directly impacted me, but, um, yeah, I just, wanna see more unity, wanna see more empathy, you know towards how the situation was handled, and how to prevent the situation, like happening again, and what we could do to stop it next time.

[00:11:32] Mona Ramonetti: So I want to actually, uh, you said it hasn't, affected you personally. Can you elaborate on that—

[00:11:45] Jennasia Otway: —It has; it has affected me like, it has affected me, um, indirectly, but not directly, so what I mean by indirectly it's affected how I've perceive certain things in society. And it has affected me through where it's desensitized me, but I know to the point where that's not okay and to the point where I actually wanna like, do something about the problem, but it hasn't directly impacted me to where, like, you know, I've, I think it's going to happen to me because—I'm a person of color, but I tend to see police brutality happening to men much more often, but it has directly, it hasn't directly impacted me to the point where I am fearful.

[00:12:41] But I'm fearful for it happening to like my father or, or my boyfriend or something. So when, I mean, by directly impacting me, it hasn't directly impacted me to the point where I'm fearful for my life, but I'm fearful for somebody else's life, if that makes sense.

[00:13:01] Mona Ramonetti: I see. I see what you mean.

[00:13:03] Um, but by—the fear that you feel for your father and your boyfriend, directly, directly impacts you.

[00:13:17] Jennasia Otway: Yeah. I, I just realized that I guess it does directly impact me.

[00:13:22] Mona Ramonetti: Right, right.

[00:13:29] Now, you had asked to differentiate between George Floyd and racism.

[00:13:34] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:13:35] Mona Ramonetti: Can you expand upon that? What would you like people to know about this time in your life?

[00:13:41] Jennasia Otway: I mean, I definitely feel like the, the murder of George Floyd was, you know, out of a racist intent. Um, if it was, if he wasn't a Black male, I don't think that would've happened.

[00:13:56] And I definitely think that, you know, racism is a part of this issue and has, is a part of many issues in our society. So I feel like, you know, as a Black person, it could directly impact me, but, before you asked, before I, before you asked that question, I didn't assume it directly impacted me, so. But racism, I thought did, so that's why I want it to [be] differentiated.

[00:14:27] Mona Ramonetti: I see. Okay. All right, then. That leads into this next question. Have you or someone you know been the victim of racial discrimination?

[00:14:37] Jennasia Otway: Um, yes.

[00:14:44] Definitely. Um, you know, I, many times I've been in a car and like, a police officer would pull, pull my boyfriend over, and, you know, I would, I would be scared. I would be scared for him too because I know it's a white cop, and it could be like something that's, you know, a minor issue, and, and it doesn't even, it's not, it's just whoever I'm in the car with, it's happened multiple times where it's just like, everyone is like, still for a second and it's just like, you're trying to not to make the wrong move. So it's just like, I feel like the system of it all, like, even if there wasn't a racial intent in that situation, the system, and like, the way our minds is like—the way our minds is like, thinking in that moment, you're thinking that it could be a racial encounter; you're thinking if you're making the wrong move, that, you know, it could lead to something, that could be, you know, life or death. And, I wouldn't say, uh, I haven't had like a racial discrimination, you know, happened to me directly, but I've, I've seen it happen in like, microaggressions. It could be like a really, I don't know, one time I, was going to take the train and, a guy was in his car, and he looked at me like he wanted to kill me.

[00:16:25] I don't know if that's a form of racism, but that I kinda like, I was fearful for my life in that moment, because I had to pass his car to get to the train station. Luckily, nothing happened, but I don't know if that was a form of racism. I just knew I was a person of color. He wasn't. And, just based off like what I've seen happening around me in that moment. And you know, my—like other people's experiences, that's how I took the situation. And that's one form of a racial, a possible racial discrimination that has affected me.

[00:17:05] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. How has it affected you, Jennasia?

[00:17:11] Jennasia Otway: Um, I feel like it's made me fearful. Like in certain areas, like, certain—I'm from a predominantly Black community, so I feel like it's made me

fearful to be alone in predominantly white communities. So, that's how it's affected me.

[00:17:42] Mona Ramonetti: So, I am, I'm going to take a leap here and say you don't frequent predominantly white neighborhoods.

[00:17:52] Jennasia Otway: Say that again?

[00:17:53] Mona Ramonetti: You don't go into many predominantly white neighborhoods.

[00:17:56] Jennasia Otway: No, I was, I grew up mainly around predominantly Black neighborhoods, I mean, in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

[00:18:07] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Well, this fear that you have, that you just expressed, does it translate to being on a predominantly white slash Asian campus such as Stony Brook?

[00:18:23] Jennasia Otway: It does. I haven't, I haven't really—experienced this with like a student, or faculty, or any type of person, like in a school setting. So I, I feel safer on campus, but this happened. Close to off campus, but it was still kind of on campus by the train station. So I just feel like since then I feel like, oh, this, you know, I should be a little bit more cautious of when I'm off campus, because I don't feel as safe off campus as I do on campus.

[00:19:09] Mona Ramonetti: I see; I see. So the four years that you've been here, in the number of years that you've been here, you haven't really been off campus as much.

[00:19:21] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:19:23] Mona Ramonetti: And that is likely due to, this fear that you have.

[00:19:31] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:19:33] Mona Ramonetti: So, the times that you have ventured off campus, this is the fear you took with you. And. Can you talk about those if, if they, uh, if you can recall, you know, what you experienced, the few instances that you've, left campus, as it relates to this particular fear or, anything regarding that?

[00:20:00] Jennasia Otway: Um, the few instances I left campus—I don't have a car, so I would tend to like, Uber a lot.

[00:20:09] And I guess, like, I don't wanna say this, but this is like my opinion of it. I would like see through the window. I would see, you know, Confederate flags and and stuff like that. And it kinda like just made me think like, okay, this is, a community that could possibly, you know, have a lot of, I could possibly have a lot of racial encounters.

[00:20:39] So like my guard is always up and I'm always like cautious of like who my Uber driver might be or like, who I might encounter and how I'm gonna react to the situation outside of like being off campus.

[00:20:57] Mona Ramonetti: Can you tell me the number of times you—or estimate the number of times that you've been off campus, and the Stony Brook community?

[00:21:04] Jennasia Otway: Um, I've been off campus, a lot, this seme—this year because, you know, due to like, personal issues; I had to go to physical therapy and stuff like that. [Mona: um-hm] So I, because of that, I've been off campus a lot, but if I didn't have to do that, I probably wouldn't have gone off campus as much as I did.

[00:21:30] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So, um, outside of the Stony Brook, (coughs) excuse me, the Stony Brook community, the Stony Brook village, have you ventured into other predominantly white communities?

[00:21:52] Jennasia Otway: No.

[00:21:55] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:21:59] So, when you leave here, we live in a predominantly white world.

[00:22:08] Jennasia Otway: Yeah.

[00:22:10] Mona Ramonetti: Um, have you thought about, what are your plans in terms of navigating this, this world that is, not predominantly, a Black world.

[00:22:24] Jennasia Otway: Um, actually I wanna take back one of my answers; I did go to a predominantly white neighborhood before. I worked in a predominantly white neighborhood.

[00:22:36] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:22:37] Jennasia Otway: Or over the summer.

[00:22:39] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:22:41] Jennasia Otway: And, I've definitely dealt with the microaggressions. And, I know how to, I feel like I've encountered a lot of situations where I know how to handle it after, you know, after I graduate or if I decide to take a job where, you know, that might, I might encounter those type of things.

[00:23:07] Mona Ramonetti: Okay.

[00:23:12] Are you fearful?

[00:23:15] Jennasia Otway: Um.

[00:23:19] I, I, I think I am. I wanna, like, I want to do nursing. And one thing I've always thought about is like, you know, I have to take care of everybody, and it's just like, what if, I get an, a patient that doesn't want me to be their nurse 'cause I'm Black and I've heard of that happening before. So it's something I think about.

[00:23:41] And it's just like nurses are put in certain, certain situations where they can't really step out of. So it's just like, as a Black nurse, how am I gonna be treated because of my skin color.

[00:23:57] Mona Ramonetti: Have you thought about, what you would do in these particular instances? I know it's a hard thing to do. Uh, I mean to conceptualize and, and sort of think, but to prepare for. But have you spoken to folks in the field—what tools have you encountered thus far to help you?

[00:24:19] Jennasia Otway: Um, I, I actually don't know. Um, from like, 'cause I would look at videos like YouTube videos of stuff like this. And I remember one girl was like, she, but you know, confront a coworker and asked them to take over while she stepped out for a second. I feel like that's what I would probably do in a situation like that to better handle it and manage it, [Mona: um-hm] instead of reacting first.

[00:24:53] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Um, yep. I think that's, that's, uh, seems a viable, choice. We could talk about it after we finish with the recording.

[00:25:05] Um, what did you—this is the last question—what do you think of Stony Brook's response and commitment to anti-racism—Stony Brook University, I'm not talking about the community.

[00:25:23] Jennasia Otway: Um, I think the response is good. Like I think it's definitely, something that's important to have on a campus that's, you know, predominantly white and Asian and, in like, surrounded by, a predominantly white neighborhood. So I think it's good to have like, projects like this, and, initiatives like

this to really show that the matter is still important and that everyone should still be aware of the issue. So.

[00:26:01] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Great. Thank you.

[00:26:05] Um, is there anything else you'd like to share with us before I hit stop?

[00:26:10] Jennasia Otway: Um, no.

[00:26:12] Mona Ramonetti: All right, Jennasia. Thank you so much. And I appreciate it. Let me, uh, hitting the stop button right now.

[Recording stops]