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Oral History Interview with Aaron Das

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with
Aaron Das

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 Aaron Das conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 6, 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: Aaron Das
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
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[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Okay, here we are. Okay. It is, uh, April 6th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Aaron Das, for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. First off, thank you for spending the time to tell us about your experiences. And I'll start off the first question.

Can you tell us how you are affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:33] Aaron Das: Hi, oh, I'm a sophomore at Stony Brook. Yeah. Uh, I'm a sophomore and I'm a student and I work for the library administration in the Dean's office. And I also work at the intro bio labs under Federal Work Study.

[00:00:51] Mona Ramonetti: Very good. So I'll delve right in, uh, when do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:01:01] Aaron Das: So, uh, I remember like two years ago, right? Like around the time it happened, I'm pretty sure, like, so like on Instagram, right. I, I follow like a lot of like news pages, but like I follow like these other, like small Instagram accounts that sort of post like, um, uh, I don't know how to say it.

Like sort of post like, um, like, like. I guess like violent stuff out. I don't know, but like, like, like Instagram accounts, you know, and I remember I, I saw like I saw a post and I saw like, um, like under the caption said, oh a, *Cop, uh, Murders, uh, George Floyd*, right? So something like, like you get the gist and I, I'm pretty sure it was like, but before it like, like official news got released and like that it started like trending, but I think when I first saw it, right, all sorta...

I mean, I, I, I'm sorta of like, oh wow. Like another, another instance of a cop killing, like, like a tri tragic, like a cop killing a victim. Right? Like, like it it's just happened too many times. I feel like I was a little like, sort of desensitized to it. So I started just like, I saw it and then I just scroll down and I was like, wow, that's, that's like really messed up. And then I saw that, like, it actually started to gain traction, like, like on the news and stuff. And I was like, wow, like people are actually doing stuff about it

now. Like, wow. Like, like I'll also, I'll just kind of surprise that like, um, that it actually became like a really big thing, but yeah.

[00:02:36] Mona Ramonetti: So, what, why were you surprised that this became a big thing?

[00:02:41] Aaron Das: Because like, um, I don't know. It's like, there's just been like, I feel like there's always been news about like, Cops killing like, like Black people or like, um, or like, just like, like victims in general, and I don't know the word, but like, there's only been like news of like cop killings. I'm like, I was like, oh yeah. Like I remember like the first time. What's the name of the movement? Um, I think Black Lives Matter. Like the first time it came up, like a couple of years ago, like in 2015, I don't remember the exact year, but like when, um, like when that cop choked the guy for buying like cigarettes or something.

Uh, I remember that that's when the Black Lives Matter, like actually started. And then like, I feel like it sort of like died. Like the movement died down until 2020 actually. I mean, I, I think I don't know I wasn't like keeping up with the news too much. I felt like that it, it sort of died down, but like, there's always been like cop killings between then and now I thought that like the killing of George Floyd was just kind of another like cop killing and that like, like I as messed up as it is, I didn't think, like, I know that it was like showed up on the news, but like, I didn't think that it'd be that evolve into like, such like, like, I guess like a reawakening of the, of the movement. I mean, I, I, the only reason I call it or reawakening is cause like I wasn't following it too much between like, like 2015 or whatever, and now, or in 2020.

[00:04:11] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Good. Good, good. Um, let's see. So. We touched upon this a little bit, but we can explore it further. What was your initial reaction to hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on, but you said on social media. So yeah, if you just want to touch upon, if you want to add to it. Go ahead.

[00:04:34] Aaron Das: Yeah. So yeah, I, I mean, I said that I was like, sort of desensitized to it, but like I watched like the full, like 10-minute video and I was like, wow, like he's, he's been, he's like, He's been on him for like so long, like what's, what's wrong with the cop. I'm like, I was really surprised cause there was another cop there too. Sort of like guarding the, I forget, I forget the actual cop's name, but he was starting like guarding him while he was kneeling on George Floyd's neck. And I was like, what? Like, you're really not going to like help hold your partner accountable for what he's doing?

Like, he was sort of just like, hope I like post it up. Like. Just like, make, like, making sure that he was doing what he was doing. Like he wasn't doing anything about it. I was like, that's that's I mean, like, obviously it's wrong. I was like, I just like, all was really like, like, oh my God, I'm stuttering so much my, my fault. But uh,—

[00:05:30] Mona Ramonetti: You go to speak, speak. This is, this is a very, uh, you feel, I know it's a touchy subject, but feel comfortable to express yourself in however shape, and, or format you need to. There's, there's no right or wrong way to express yourself in this interview.

[00:05:47] Aaron Das: Okay. Okay. Thank you. Yeah. So yes. All I was like, oh, he's, he's been kneeling on his neck for like six minutes now like, are you going to like, get up, like, come on. Like give it, give the guy a break. Like you probably cause I'm pretty sure the caption had even said that like, I think all he had was a counterfeit of \$20 dollars. And like he, the cop did all of that over, just the counterfeit 20. Like it, it just didn't make any sense to me. It's like, like, is this really like, was this a real video of fake? I was, I was just like really surprised.

[00:06:16] Mona Ramonetti: Wow, so at some point you thought that maybe this was not real, based on what you said there.

[00:06:23] Aaron Das: Yeah. Yeah. Right. So sort of, it was, I was just like really surprised.

[00:06:28] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah, I can see that. Actually. I can actually see that because again, hearkening back to what you said, most folks have become, uh, have become desensitized to this, uh, viewing such things on—

[00:06:42] Aaron Das: Like social media,

[00:06:43] Mona Ramonetti: —on social media or television. Um, good. Well, thank you. Um, Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook during this time?

[00:06:57] Aaron Das: Uh, so I, when it happened, I was still a senior in high school, so, uh, I didn't like reach out to anybody in like Stony Brook. Cause like, I didn't really know anybody, didn't really know anybody at Stony Brook. I didn't, I didn't know, like what, what, what, what was going on at Stony Brook either because I was like around the quarantine time. So I kinda just like, I remember we had like discussions about like in one of my classes and. Yeah. Or like a couple of my classes.

[00:07:23] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. All right. So around that time you were making the decision to go to attend Stony Brook. You didn't have that communication just yet, with Stony Brook.

[00:07:34] Aaron Das: Yeah, exactly.

[00:07:36] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So many who witnessed the murder, described it as a pivotal moment in American history. Do you agree or disagree with that sentiment?

[00:07:49] Aaron Das: Hm. I mean, I don't know about like in American history in general, I think it was like, it was definitely like, what's the word, a catalyst for like the, the reawakening, as I mentioned, like the reawakening of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, I think it's still, it's still like going like sort of strong, even though it's like quite a dot on social media a little bit. Like, I'm pretty sure it's like, it's still like going sort of strong, like, uh, like, especially like our generation, like we're really passionate about, uh, about like, uh, achieving like equal rights and like, um, equal status, for people, equal social status, especially like when it comes to like, um, how a higher institutions like view down on the general public.

Um, I, yeah, so I think it was sort of like a catalyst, uh, but I don't know I think like larger change is still yet to come. Like I think like for, for our society, for our society to actually like change for like what the general public wants. I think like some larger event might have to happen. Not, not that I'm not like belittling like, like the death of George Floyd as like, um, I'm not like belittling it, I'm just saying like, like it was, it was a catalyst for what happened in 2020, but I think like for, because I, look at, look at where we are now. I think like, even like the the NYPD's [New York Police Department] budget is still increasing is still increasing, like they're reallocating funds from other like important public sectors.

Like, um. Like, uh, I don't know, the other sectors, like they're, they're reallocate, they're minimizing funds from like schools and hospitals and just putting more into the NYPD. I think it's the same for, um, in California as well. Like with the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] or whatever. Like I I've seen, cause one of my friends goes to, lives in California. So he's been like posting about it, but yeah, like I think like there's still so much change that left to do and I, I don't, I mean, I don't know what event could like spark it or like who could do it, but I don't, I don't, I like, there's just, there's just still so much to do.

[00:10:01] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Yeah, I know. I mean, I think very, and from my own point of view, I remember when this happened, folks likened it to, um, Martin Luther King Jr's, um, his many, many, many, many, many, um, peaceful resistance to, in his fight for, uh, to combat racism in this country. And I remember some folks saying, well, I don't know if you're familiar with that photograph. Uh, I think it's from the fifties where there's a policeman holding a German shepherd and, uh, and it's up against, uh, a Black person. A Black individual. And that the first time that was shown on television, that was when it got into the consciousness of the United States of the American people, because it was the first time they realized that this thing was not, uh, something that was just happening in a different part of the, of the, of the world.

It was happening here. Racism was really here. It was real. So that was a very pivotal, a very important, uh, photograph in American history as it relates to, um, to racism in this country. So they were likening that to what happened to George Floyd so, yeah. And the fact of the matter is it could be, I mean, some of us are a bit older, so we have that point of reference—

[00:11:41] Aaron Das: Oh yeah yeah.

[00:11:42] Mona Ramonetti: —and, um, but, it was, there was something there, I think that, um, many detected that we, there was a shift, there was a shift with this particular one and it makes sense. I mean, here we are discussing it a couple of years—

[00:12:01] Aaron Das: Like two years later. Yeah.

[00:12:03] Mona Ramonetti: —You know, we're, we are embarking we're, we're actually knee deep in this project right now, trying to capture these, these perspectives. Um, so it, it, you know, it's interesting. Okay. So, uh, what good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:12:22] Aaron Das: Uh, yeah so, uh I just like the, I think the ones that like, most people want, like, um, like, I feel like police reform, better police training, so that like events, like what happened with George Floyd don't happen again. Um, like I heard this one, like a lot around the time and still now, like what I mentioned before, like reallocation of funds from the police to other, from the police, to other social reform projects. Cause like, I think the only, or like one of the main reasons contributing to crime in general is because a lot of people don't have such, um, uh, like access to like proper education or like proper food sources or proper jobs.

So if we reallo[cate] but like the, our police departments, they get so much funding just to control or keep check of our general public. So if we could reallocate funds from the police to help these people or like help, uh, underprivileged people that we can help them have a better life. And I think that's what, like reduce it, like what truly reduces crime rate. So yeah.

[00:13:33] Mona Ramonetti: Yes.

[00:13:34] Aaron Das: I remember. Yeah. A lot, a lot of people were pushing for this back when, um, well, we're, we're talking about it back when, uh, George Floyd got murdered, like around like May and June in 2020, yeah. And like you, like, you look two years later, the mayor, like whoever does the budgets, they're doing the exact opposite of what they should do, but it makes no sense. I mean, I don't, I don't know. I think like companies are important to society, but like, so is the people like,

you have to take care of the people first and you can't just like, um. They think of them as inherently bad that like, people need help, but yeah.

[00:14:19] Mona Ramonetti: Right. So you're hoping for a re-examination of allocation of funds, to see—

[00:14:26] Aaron Das: Uh-huh, like, and like giving more resources to underprivileged people or like people living in like generally poor areas or what in areas where like crime is higher.

[00:14:37] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Good. Thank you. Uh, what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced as it relates to the George Floyd murder?

[00:14:48] Aaron Das: Hmm. So, uh, for me speaking from my point of view personally, right? Cause so it was during quarantine, like what, when COVID started, like, I was a senior in high school. I just, like, I've been off from school for like about a month or two. And I knew that I wasn't going back to school until college officially started in August or in September, basically. So I was kind of just relaxing. I like, uh, I remember a lot of people were like, um, attending like protests and stuff in the city because I live in Queens, right. A lot of people were attending like protests and stuff.

Like COVID was still a thing. So I was kind of scared to attend the protests. (laughs) Uh, also like, um, I remember like a couple of stores are out in my area, like, like one of the shopping malls or like a couple of them, they like got boarded up because of like the riots and stuff that were going on. Uh, yeah. Uh, yeah. So, oh wait, what was the question again?

[00:15:47] Mona Ramonetti: Sure. (laughs) what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced as it relates to this.

[00:15:56] Aaron Das: Well, yeah, so I think my experience was basically just like keeping track of like what was going on, so, on social media. Because I kind of like really, I didn't really want to go out and like risk getting COVID, uh, uh, as much as I wanted to like, attend the protest and like contribute, you know. Uh, I think I donated a couple to like some of like the charities and stuff, like a couple of dollars to like the charities and stuff. Uh, yeah, I mean, my experience wasn't like too much. I'll, I'll try. I basically just keeping track on social media, like try to try to stay informed on like, oh, what's going on? But like, um, possible like, like what, what people other people are doing to like, um, to combat like racism and like, um, improve like the quality of the movement.

[00:16:40] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. So did you perceive it as something that was, um, just (pauses and exhales) there for consumption, viewing consumption, or was it something that resonated with you on some level?

[00:16:57] Aaron Das: Hmm. I, yeah, I think my experience was more like more like consuming the content that was coming towards me because I don't know if it like resonated with me because like, I mean, social justice is like interesting to me, but I feel like me as a person, I'm not like experienced enough for like, um, or like informed for yeah. Like experienced or informed enough to actually like dabble in it, you know, like. Like, I, I, I I'd leave it to like the experienced people to, to like, to like deal with it. I'm more of like a, like a science type of guy, (laughs) so I'll just stay in like my lab and stuff.

[00:17:42] Mona Ramonetti: (laughs) Yes. Okay. Um. Uh, let's see, we have a little more time left and these, these are additional questions. Have you or someone, you know, been the victim of racial discrimination?

[00:17:59] Aaron Das: Uh, I don't, throughout my life I don't think I've ever like, very privileged of me, but, like lucky of me I guess, like, I don't think I've ever been a victim of like racial discrimination, uh, except, I mean, like when I was like in middle school, like elementary school, like I I'm, I'm like Brown and Bengali. So I hear like the, uh, like the, your, your stereotype, like the stereotypical Brown comments like, "you smell like curry," or whatever. But like I thought it was sort of funny, but like, I remember one time in fifth grade, um, one of my friends gave me something to hand to another student, right? So I go to hand it to the other student and she was like, no, I don't want to take it from you.

I'm like, why what's so bad? And she's like, you're Brown, you're dirty. I'm like, what the hell? Oh, like I was laughing, cause it just, it made no sense to me. So I was laughing, but then I'll speak about it literally, like, What the, what the, what, the, what the hell? Like, what does that even mean? So I guess, I think that's like the only, like I, myself I've encountered, um, reference to like my friends, um, uh, one of my friends is, um, Sikh, right? So in high school, he, he used to wear his turban, but now he doesn't wear his turban anymore. But so in high school used to wear his turban, right? So one time he was walking down the street and there was like, um, this guy that I was like handing out flyers and like, it was like chatting stuff.

And then he, he saw my friend and he saw his turban so, he was like, oh, you caused 9/11 [ed. note: September 11, 2001 attack on the United States] and my friend also started laughing because it made no sense to him because it wasn't even like it was a Sikh that did 9/11 it was like a radical group of terrorists that did 9/11. Uh, I don't think religion really has anything to do with like terrorism. Or people that justify terrorism with religion are aren't using, aren't like using their religion correctly. I'd say like, I think they're like very extreme. And did. Yeah. They're not following their teachings correctly. They're just like radicalizing it and making their

people look bad. So, yeah, that was a tangent, but, um, yeah, so I don't think me or other people I know have, uh, encountered racism in my life, luckily.

[00:20:26] Mona Ramonetti: Um, okay. So I think that is it in terms of my questions. Um, I mean, I have to point out to you, uh, just what, the example that you shared with me just now is racism, that you and your friend experienced is racism.

[00:20:51] Aaron Das: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. I feel like, I mean, that sounds a little like my friend's experience or my experience. But I feel like, I mean, yeah, I know, I know it is racism, but I think it's just like on like the lower bar of it. I mean, like that's like I, yeah, I guess, but like I don't know. I, I don't know.

[00:21:13] Mona Ramonetti: No, I mean, I look, I wonder, uh, and I don't want to put words in your mouth of course, because I'm the one that's interviewing you. Um, you, you received this you're, you're relatively young. And so you're, you're getting a lot of new experiences along the way. And, um, so you know, it just, it takes time to process. You know what it is that you, you have lived through. So, and, and I think it's just a part of growing up or just living, I should say, not even growing up of living. So you get these experiences and later in life, you, you can reflect on it. Um, but yeah, I think it's, it's healthy to acknowledge, but also, acknowledge, recognize, try to do what you need to do to combat it.

And, um, also. Live with that knowledge and move forward as well. So, um, but I just wanted to point out to you that, you know, it was racism, so, and then not to downplay what your experience was actually. Um, is there anything else you would like to share?

[00:22:31] Aaron Das: Um, I don't think so. Yeah.

[00:22:37] Mona Ramonetti: Closing statement or anything like that?

[00:22:40] Aaron Das: Uh, no, I don't think so.

[00:22:44] Mona Ramonetti: All right. Well, thank you so much. So what I'm going to do right now is I'm going to stop the recording and then. It's going to send it to the clouds. If you could just wait a moment until we get that, just to make sure everything is okay. Okay. Again, Aaron, thank you so much for this. And as soon as we have the transcript all up and ready to go, we will be sending it to you. Additionally, there's a release form that I'm going to send to you right after this for you to sign off on, um, and maybe—

[00:23:16] Aaron Das: Uh, I was, I was looking at the Google form. You sent me, I remember you sent me one last week. I think it just asks for like my, my name and

student ID. And then you sent me one in, uh, email yesterday. Uh, I thought it was the same form, but I think it's different. So, uh, should I fill this out now?

[00:23:33] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah, you go ahead and fill it out and send it to me. And then, um, I will go ahead and send that release form. Okay.

[Recording stops]