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Oral History Interview with Nancee Moes

Mona Ramonetti

mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu

Victoria Pilato

SUNY Stony Brook, victoria.pilato@stonybrook.edu

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Recommended Citation

Ramonetti, Mona and Pilato, Victoria, "Oral History Interview with Nancee Moes" (2022). *Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community*. 19.

<https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/racialunrest/19>

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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

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

Oral History Interview with
Nancee Moes

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 Nancee Moes conducted by Mona Ramonetti on April 11, 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: Nancee Moes
Interviewer: Mona Ramonetti
Session Number: One session
Locations: Stony Brook, NY
Date: April 11, 2022
Pages: 11

[00:00:00] Mona Ramonetti: Good morning. It is April 11th, 2022. This is Mona Ramonetti interviewing Nancy Moes for the Racial Unrest of 2020: Experiences from the Stony Brook University Community Digital Project. Again, thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Can you tell us how you're affiliated with Stony Brook University?

[00:00:22] Nancee Moes: Yeah, I'm, I'm a Lecturer at the School of Communication in Journalism. Um, my sort of internal title is, uh, is Assistant Professor of Practice, but Lecturer, non-tenure track.

[00:00:33] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Very good. When do you first remember hearing about the murder of George Floyd?

[00:00:42] Nancee Moes: Um, I'm sure that it was online. I'm now realizing I, I don't know for sure. Um like exactly where online I heard it. Um, it could have been, some possibilities could have been through, um, NPR [National Public Radio] could have been just listening to, um, WSHU [Connecticut National Public Radio Station] online and then hearing the top of the news. It could have been there.

It also, might've been through Instagram where I follow some news sources there, but also people tend to of course share news that way, too.

[00:01:27] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Uh, what was your initial reaction to hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, social media?

[00:01:39] Nancee Moes: I never watched it. I made the choice to not watch it.

The description I felt like was, I asked myself, like, what would be the purpose of watching it? And I was like, I don't think there's any good that would come out of me watching that. So I, I didn't, I felt like the description of it was, um, impactful enough. And I'm sorry, can you repeat the question one more time?

I got distracted by what the watching portion of it.

[00:02:17] Mona Ramonetti: What was your initial reaction when hearing about and, or viewing George Floyd's death on television, internet, or social media?

[00:02:26] Nancee Moes: Um, I actually think that was my initial response was kind of part of that as well. Uh, um, I'm already having a emotional, physical reaction right now, just thinking about it, but, um. Horror. Um, anger. Uh, disbelief followed quickly by, um, a kind of cynical, "This is how the world is," reaction.

Um—yeah, I, I remember reaching out to, I remember wanting to reach out to, um, former students of mine that I'm connected with, like on, on Instagram, you know, afterward, after they're not students anymore, I give them permission to socially connect with me. Um, and then also some, some people that I knew in grad school, and I remember wanting to reach out, um, to friends of mine or former students of mine, particularly Black friends and Black former students of mine. Um, and I had I remember having, uh, a little moment of like, will reaching out make it worse? Like, does me—I just remember that being a question that I had of like, does me reaching, like, saying I'm thinking about them or praying for them in this, like, does that, you know, make, make them feel like, um, I'm only thinking about their race at this time and that they couldn't have a more complex reaction to it than that.

Um, and ultimately I did, I did reach out to pretty much everyone that I was able to reach out to and, and, um, included in that, uh, like, you don't have to respond I'm just I'm just letting you know, most of them received it quite well, and some of them didn't respond and that's fine too. Um, but I, yeah.

And then after that, it was just sort of a long, uh, a long and continued season of like impotence feeling impotent and not really knowing what the right resp responses as like a friend or an acquaintance or a former teacher or. Uh, you know, like just, just not exactly knowing how best to respond.

[00:04:59] Mona Ramonetti: So I'm going to follow up with that. Um, did you ever voice what you just shared with any of the folks that you reached out to?

[00:05:12] Nancee Moes: Um, one. One of them who responded, uh, a friend of mine. I mean, like a very, not a close friend. Um, but doesn't live in this state anymore and we, we knew each other when we were both in grad school. Um, and he responded and we sort of had a conversation and I did bring that up. I was like, I didn't, I wasn't really sure like what to say or what to, what to do. Um, but not to every one of them. I think, I think he was the only one.

[00:05:43] Mona Ramonetti: And what was his response to your expressing this ambivalence?

[00:05:50] Nancee Moes: Um, I think I remember him saying that it was like, it, it was that he was glad that I reached out.

Um—yeah.

[00:06:09] Mona Ramonetti: Okay. Okay, thank you. So, uh, this is actual follow up to what we just discussed here. Did you seek out communication with anyone from Stony Brook University during this time?

[00:06:26] Nancee Moes: Um, apart from colleagues in my school (Mona: um-hm) or leadership within, within the school? Um, no, I don't think so. Um— yeah, I don't think so.

[00:06:46] Mona Ramonetti: Um-hm. So there was no discussion amongst yourself and your colleagues?

[00:06:53] Nancee Moes: Oh no. There was plenty of discussion among myself and my colleagues and it was and in leadership too, but I thought you were asking outside of that.

[00:07:02] Mona Ramonetti: No, no, no, no. We're talking about within Stony Brook University.

[00:07:05] Nancee Moes: Oh no we, that was front of mind for a very long time. And it actually kicked off this extended, we're still in this period, this like now coming up on two year period where we're, um, revisiting pretty much all our curriculum and going like, okay, where, you know, what are the, what are the places where we, cause it's a largely white faculty that we have, um, not exclusively, but largely, and particularly white women as well.

Um, but like it, it kicked off this period of examination and going back to the drawing board and, um, I remember one colleague of mine, um, reaching out to students for feedback after grades so that they knew whatever they said would have no effect on their grade whatsoever. And getting a lot of good feedback about like, this activity does not work for these reasons.

Or like, when you said this or that discussion, uh, like, uh, I couldn't feel like I could speak up or when you said that it felt like that, you know, all, we got a lot, a lot of feedback and, um. I think. So this has been an ongoing discussion for, for, um, the faculty. And I'm not sure and definitely for the faculty for the school as a whole, but in particular, I'm, I'm at the [Alan] Alda Center, I think a bit that's really where my roots are.

And so, um, yeah, it expanded into a broader conversation about equity in like teaching equity. And, um, our relationship to power as teachers, um, just complicated and yeah. (laughter) Yeah.

[00:09:04] Mona Ramonetti: So the, uh, uh, students that you reached out to and your colleagues as well, these were exclusively students of color, or was this across the board?

[00:09:18] Nancee Moes: Um well, in, in which context are you asking about?

[00:09:22] Mona Ramonetti: You, you cited, um, colleagues reaching out to students and saying after the fact—

[00:09:29] Nancee Moes: Oh yeah.

[00:09:29] Mona Ramonetti: —just for the feedback. Was that exclusively? Uh, or is it just, are all students?

[00:09:36] Nancee Moes: That was, yeah, in all of our, our classes, like everybody was invited to give. (Mona: Ok) We had some prompts, but really it was very open-ended and I remember the the first, the first semester after, so would've been Fall 2020, I remember two of my colleagues having, they had built an extra class in, a sort of cushion class, and it ended up being, um, just a, an open forum to discuss, um, uh, just race in particular, but also, um, different, different elements of identity and how they connect to how we communicate and the obstacles that different people face based on who they are. Um, and that was a totally open, no one had to, you weren't given extra credit for attending and you weren't and it was just an open forum and a lot of people came, um, and led that discussion. But that was open to everybody and, and it ended up expanding because we learned a lot about, um, how we weren't really serving, uh, English language learners with our curriculum, uh, they were being left out of that process. It was, it was fascinating to hear like the way certain pockets would talk about, you know, their experience, um, because of their race in the classroom. And then have other pockets talk about as an international students. And like the impact was the same, even though the way it was playing out was very different. Yeah.

[00:11:04] Mona Ramonetti: Interesting. That's um, hopefully that was a very fruitful exercise or continues to be a very fruitful exercise for your department. Um, okay.

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

[00:11:28] Nancee Moes: I would agree. I think, um— yeah, it had, it changed. It changed things. I don't think that it, hmm, how do I put this? I mean, we could go on a lot of different directions with this. (both laugh)

I, I, I remember reading an article and I can't remember who published it or who, or who the author was, but, um, I remember someone identifying that the way that, that event in particular, um, mobilized the Black Lives Matter movement, which of course already existed. Um, but the way that it gave it credibility, I think, and to a larger audience. Um, I remember in that article that I'm talking about, the, you know, there was a difference between, um, they were drawing some parallels between the protests of the fifties and sixties and now, and saying like, um, here's all the stuff that's changed. But when key things that changed is now a lot of white people are involved in a way that they weren't in the, in the fifties and sixties.

Um, and I, and I actually, I think maybe from, for a lot of people, I don't, I'm not sure that it was necessarily pivotal for, for many people of color. Cause I don't know how much changed for them. I don't know. I'm clearly, I'm not like the whitest person, I know I'm in more ways than one, but I do think for, for the average person, it was like, I, you can't ignore it anymore.

It's there. Now you can choose to malign it, and you can choose to, um, discredit it, and you can choose to minimize it, and you can choose to weaponize it for political gain, which certainly all of those things have been done. Um, but you can't ignore it anymore. Um, so I think in that, in that respect, for sure.

[00:13:43] Mona Ramonetti: Right, yeah.

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

[00:13:54] Nancee Moes: Um— Well, I, I would like to think that a lot of the smaller, um, policy shifts and in particular more accountability for police force, um, I would like to think (mumbled talking) all the lots of things. Oh, sorry.

[00:14:16] Mona Ramonetti: I, it looks like you just broke up there.

[00:14:18] Nancee Moes: Oh!

[00:14:18] Mona Ramonetti: So yeah. (Nancy: Can you hear me now?) That's, yeah. Let's uh, you're freezing up a bit. Okay so. Okay. Can you hear me?

[00:14:26] Nancee Moes: Yeah, I can hear you.

[00:14:28] Mona Ramonetti: Let's restart that question. (Nancy: Sure) What good do you hope will come from the events surrounding George Floyd's murder?

[00:14:37] Nancee Moes: Yeah, I would like to think that, um, we would have greater accountability for police officers and police force. I would like to think, um, and some things have shifted in some places around that. I would like to think that there is, um, that there would be a broader, willingness to engage in this discussion openly. And, but I think what we've seen is like, yes, for one about half the country and the other half of the country is like, "No, we don't talk about it. Let's ban all, anything that even mentions," like "We don't want to change." So I would like to see that that happens, but I, um, I think if anything a greater dedication and commitment on the part of the people who've been positively affected by it. I would like to think that that's a good thing that can come from it, like a willingness to push forward, even though there is a very loud, powerful, concerted 40% of the country that wants nothing to do with it—

I'm just, I'm just guessing with the percentage, but I, I d- I don't, I'd like to think that they're moveable, but, um, you can't really argue people into changing their hearts. That's if people don't actually enter into relationships, if people don't really listen to each other and we don't, we don't really listen to each other, especially not about political things.

Yeah. If, if anything, just commitment and tenacity in the face of what will be in long and incremental uphill battle, I'm sure, as it has been.

[00:16:49] Mona Ramonetti: Right. Absolutely. Absolutely. Um, what would you like people to know about this time in your life and what you experienced?

[00:17:12] Nancee Moes: I think no one has to know anything. Part of me is like me. You don't have to know anything. It's not that impressive. But since I'm participating in this for the purpose of that, I think the, willingness to, um, to struggle and be, um, continually affected by it because there's a desire if you can, if you're not immediately affected by it to just stop looking at it anymore. Cause it's like exhausting and you have in, you're able to step away from it. Cause it's not your reality. So I think that's been the, uh, kind of like soul level reckoning with my own desire to, to sort of cultivate comfort and then being faced with that and being like, Ooh, yeah.

If given the option to just not engage, I will just not engage that, and like seeing that in myself and going, "That's ugly. I don't like that. I don't like that at all." Um, or willing to engage in ways that like, make me feel like I'm being productive, which is not necessarily a bad thing. That's not a bad thing.

Um, but I just worry that then that keeps me from engaging in ways that like, maybe I don't feel productive, but maybe that's not about me feeling productive. I don't, I don't know. Um, yeah, living here a lot and in here and just sort of this, this is the gesture that no one listening to this audio recording can, can see. Yeah.

[00:19:19] Mona Ramonetti: Um, just to follow up with that, why did you choose to be interviewed today? This isn't, this is normally a question that I don't ask others, but I think in light of what you just said, why did you choose to sit before me and answer these questions? Which, I mean, obviously incredibly impactful to you. Yeah.

And you don't have to answer it if you don't want to, if it's too difficult, but I, um, I don't think, yes,

[00:19:56] Nancee Moes: I understand why you asked that question. (laughs) I'm not sure. I had a moment where I was like, oh, they don't, I'm not who they're looking for for this. So like, this is not who they need then I also, I think I also had the thought of like, Oh, but what if nobody responds, you, you still, you want to get like a good mix of people and a good mix of responses.

So I think part of it was just kind of, um, I don't know. Yeah, I guess, I don't know. I don't know. (laughs)

[00:20:34] Mona Ramonetti: That, that's perfectly fine. For the record, um, a lot of folks outside of, okay, I will say many white folks when approached, um, feel that way they conveyed it. Uh, what can I do? I am not really entrenched in this, but you know, this is not part of my norm as such my daily norm. Um,

However it is important and you, you followed it up. It is important for all these voices. These varied voices, white, black, purple to be engaged in order for us to make any progress, um, and being engaged, honestly. And I, and I, uh, judging from the last, uh, almost half hour, we've been speaking. I see you trying to balance it with the honesty is coming out very, very strong, your honesty. And that's what we want to capture.

Um, you know, all too often and often we everything is, um, somewhat prescribed and sanitized and how the jargon that's used to describe the situation. (Nancy: yeah) That's all rehearsing and a project like this, wants to elicit beyond the surface, beyond the jargon. (Nancy)

[00:22:08] Nancee Moes: Yeah.

[00:22:09] Mona Ramonetti: Honesty. And I think, I think this interview captured very well. Thank you. Um,

[00:22:17] Nancee Moes: Thank your for the opportunity to talk.

[00:22:20] Mona Ramonetti: (laughs) So I'm going to ask one more question. This is an optional question.

Um, have you known someone who's been a victim of racial discrimination?

[00:22:35] Nancee Moes: Oh yeah. I mean, um, when given the chance to share, um, which I try to do in different formats, um, not expressly for that purpose in the classroom, but just like, there's a number of activities we do that are personal.

And so if people feel safe and choose to share that stuff comes out and it comes out pretty much every semester. So students for sure. Um, some, some of my friends as well, um, I have a pretty formative, I, the friend that I reached out to that I spoke of earlier, you know, who I actually shared with, I was like offloading back and forth.

He was involved in, uh, a conversation. I'm going to try to make this as vague as possible while still making sense, but like we were involved in a project and he, um, and the other Black man were the two co-hosts and they had, uh, come to the meeting, um, with like this idea of how they were going to set the scene for them as the hosts.

Um, and they were really focused on their credibility in their field, etc. And everybody else pretty much. I mean, everybody else in the room was, was white or at least passing for white. And as far as I know, and, um, everyone else in the room was like, you don't need to do that. Like, we're totally behind you.

Like, you have this name behind you. You don't need to like defend where you are in this position. And it became, and they shared that like, They, um, uh, felt an extra need. "We don't, we don't look like people who have this role. We do need to prove our credentials." Um, and everyone else at the table was like, no, you don't, you don't.

And I remember like shrinking in my seat because I could, I like viscerally could tell what was happening. And I did not know how to respond. Like did not know what to do. Um, one of the other people at the tables said something that was like, very, like, I couldn't, honestly, I couldn't believe that she said it where she was like, "I read a poem once and now I know what it's like to be Black."

And I was like, what!? What are you talking about!? Oh God, it was like the only thing I said in the interaction where I was like, um, as much as any white woman would like, what are you talking about, but that was all that I said. And I remember

the whole, they just like shut down after that conversation. And after we left the room, I went up to him and I just said, I'm, I'm s- I'm so sorry that that happened.

And he felt talked over. I was like, I did not know what to say or do. Um, and I, this is, this is a little bit tangential and I'm not realizing this story, but it was really formative for me because I ha I carry a lot of shame about that. I felt like. I knew it was happening, I knew it, like I felt it and I recognized it.

I did not know what to say or how to say. And I, I think, I think that, I mean, like that continues a lot. I try to, I try, I've tried to learn from that as much as possible. Um, I think it matters that I apologized. I think that matters. Try to learn from it. Um, but just being in the room and have seen it even in a supportive room where everybody in that room was like, no, we're totally behind you and get in getting it so wrong.

It was, it was just a formative, like front row seat of like, God, this happens to them all the time. It must all the time from, well, you know, yeah.

[00:26:47] Mona Ramonetti: Yeah. Well, you know, uh, you touched upon something there. Um, this is difficult. It is difficult. And, uh, and, and that example is a great example of how difficult this is, however it's, (laughs) it's not going to be an easy, it's not an easy process. And I think it's so uncomfortable for everybody involved that, you know, our nature is to want this to be addressed. And, you know, we get results and everything is, is, you know is perfect. No not perfect, but everything is, is sort of copacetic.

And, and the fact of the matter is the discomfort is part of the process. And I'm just speaking as, as someone who has been doing this work for a bit and being who I am. Um, but I think we have to be lenient and forgiving of ourselves. All of us in these conversations.

Um, the. It's, guilt is fine, (both laugh) but not, it shouldn't be all consuming.

And the recognition of, oh, you know, look it's being placed in an uncomfortable positions. Most of us don't want to be part of it. Most of us aren't even equipped to do that.

[00:28:22] Nancee Moes: Yeah.

[00:28:22] Mona Ramonetti: So, and in an instance where this is such a huge, uh, um, weight that this country bares.

[00:28:30] Nancee Moes: Yeah.

[00:28:31] Mona Ramonetti: Honesty of, or the ability to be honest in these conversations.

I think we're just learning (laughs) in all of these years. I think we're just now learning how to do it with each other. So it's going to be uncomfortable. It's going to be painful. We're all going to walk away feeling not so great, but the idea is for us to get back to the table and still continue these conversations.

Will there ever be a time when these conversations are not uncomfortable? I don't know. Human nature is very strange, (laughs) but we're trying. That's, that's, that's my take on this. Um, and I, I'm just, I'm just following up really with, with what you just said, the. The weight, the weight that is, uh, I can see that's on your, in your face and on your shoulders.

Um, and I it's, it's just a very painful thing for our country and our world to go through today, but we have to talk, we have to keep talking. So that's why we're doing these types of projects. What are your thoughts?

[00:29:47] Nancee Moes: I'm inclined to agree. I'm inclined to agree with, with all of that. And, and, and yet still, you know, I'll sign off and be like, I still feel ill-equipped to like, (both laugh) yeah its still uncomfortable. Yeah.

[00:30:01] Mona Ramonetti: Uh, yeah I think it's, you know, I have two kids and I'm just, I'm. You know, people are, oh, you're an expert. You know, my daughter's 20 whatever. And my son is in his late teens and coming up behind me or, oh, you're an expert and every day I feel like, no, this is, this is new every day, (Nancy: yeah) every day. And that's, I'm liking it this what we're just talking about what we've just discussed here.

[00:30:29] Nancee Moes: Yeah.

[00:30:29] Mona Ramonetti: Every day is new. There's those who are, uh, seemingly knowledgeable cannot be completely knowledgeable in this particular area of, of strife in our world and in our country, in our nation.

[00:30:45] Nancee Moes: Yeah.

[00:30:46] Mona Ramonetti: So the best we can do is keep talking to each other and sharing and, and coming up with actionable, um, solutions that you know, that hopefully have some impact.

[00:31:00] Nancee Moes: I will say, um, this, this experience, this conversation just now, I feel like has helped. I feel already has been more helpful for me in processing. You know, some of this stuff then like nine colloquia that have been held. Like, I, I

haven't, as much as I care about the issue, I have to say, like, honestly, I have very little desire to sign on to another webinar with a bunch of experts talking about issues where I'm like, I don't, I just don't think like some best practices and guidance is like, I just feel like maybe it's just the conversations, like really being willing to have conversations, um, which is an in- that's. Is, is that the biggest part of the, the battle in many ways? I think it might be because people don't want to talk cause it's, uh, you know, uh, myself included. Cause I get emotionally triggered when someone says something.

That I'm, you know, have a moral objection to, or that I just, you know?

[00:32:16] Mona Ramonetti: Yep. Yep. It's understandable. All right. So this concludes the end of our interview. Is there anything else you'd like to share or it's? It's been exhausting enough. (both laugh) All right, I am going to stop the recording and then we can chat a little bit for a few minutes.

[Recording stops]