

Bianca Diaz interviews Desiree Colon
October 13, 2020
Kingston, New York

Bianca Diaz: So, just to start off, my name is Bianca Elena Diaz and I'm interviewing Desiree Nicole Colon over zoom on October 13th, 2020. Do you give me permission to record and distribute this oral history?

DC: I do.

BD: Alright so, I'm going to have you fill in some basic stuff first, So, What is your full name?

DC: Desiree Nicole Colon

BD: Age?

DC: I'm 22.

BD: 22! Occupation?

DC: I am a consumer hired DSP.

BD: Okay. What do you racially identify as?

DC: White- White and Hispanic.

BD: Gender Identity?

DC: I'm a cis-female.

BD: Your sexual orientation?

DC: Bisexual.

BD: Where are you from?

DC: Port Ewen, New York.

BD: Okay, would you mind telling me how you and your family ended up in New York City?

DC: We actually moved out of New York City but, it just sort of- was where we all grew up. Wasn't really a choice there.

BD: Okay so, Why do you think the anti-racist protests have erupted?

DC: I think people are really starting to see how unjust the world is and instead of sitting back and taking it, we're finally realizing that we do have power and we can make a change, but we have to do it together. And the protests are a way of saying we are all in this together. Yeah.

BD: Why do you think that New York has become an epicenter for protests?

DC: I mean the NYPD definitely does not have a good reputation for racial sensitivity. And, I think that a lot of New Yorkers can really empathize and feel for the struggles of black Americans all over the country, even if they're not black. I think Eric Garner was in New York City if I remember correctly.

BD: I think so. How have the uprisings across the country shifted how you think about your ethnic identity in your place, in U.S. society?

DC: It's definitely made me realize that I do hold privilege as a white passing hispanic, like sitting in work hearing my coworkers talking about how these protests are crazy and how they should just fall in line, it- it sort of opened my eyes to the divide in the country that I didn't really realize was there because I was just living my life.

BD: Yeah. Do you have any stories you are willing to share about encounters you've had with racism or the police?

DC: I've only ever been like *pause* Well this one recently happened, I got pulled over and the area I live in is a very white neighborhood. It's very suburbs you know? And the cop looked at my ID, looked at me, saw my last name was Colon and he went "Oh, you live in Port Ewen, do you actually live there or just get your mail there?" And I know it's not like a super harmful thing, but like that kind of microaggression just really got under my skin because if my last name was Smith he would not have asked that.

BD: Yeah. Are more stories among friends and family members being shared about racism and the police, since the protests started?

DC: I definitely think that protests have given way to like, people being more open to sharing their stories; like they've always been there but it just sort of exposed them another layer.

BD: Why do you think the protests are making these stories arise?

DC: I think that's what they were always meant to do, you don't protest thinking that change is gonna happen instantly, the protests were meant to open people's eyes to what's going on and I think the fact that those stories are being more shared, as a result of the protest means they are doing their jobs.

BD: Have you learned about an experience about someone close to you?

DC: I can't say I have, no.

BD: Were you at all in digital or in person activism in the last 6 months?

DC: Yeah I've gone to a couple of marches, none so far down the river but in my hometown we've held a lot of marches and community events for the Black Lives Matter movement.

BD: Why did you decide to get involved?

DC: I think it's my responsibility as a citizen of the United States to show the government and the people in power that I'm not okay with what's going on. Clearly other people aren't either.

BD: How have protests in the context of the Coronavirus shifted the way you think race, when you think about race in America?

DC: I think it definitely shows people like, where our priorities are. I remember the first one I went to everyone around me was like "Why would you go to a protest you're gonna get sick" and like as long as everything is socially distanced I don't really care. There are more important things going on right now, but people wanna exist in a vacuum and want one thing to be bad at a time and that's not how it works.

BD: Yeah. I can attest; masks and hand sanitizer were used and present. How have the last few months changed how you think about police and racism in the U.S.?

DC: I think I'm definitely a lot less open to dealing with police like my cousin is a cop so, I've always felt like police were a safe bet for me.

BD: Mhm

DC: And now seeing that I'm not as white passing I thought and seeing the hostility that they have toward people who aren't like them, it's kind of demoralizing.

BD: Did you learn more about the history of racism since the protests started?

DC: I can't say that the protests really showed me anything new, as a sociology major I've been looking into for years so, it just sort of solidified the lesson for me.

BD: Well, as a sociology major has anything stood out to you about the racism in the country that maybe makes more sense now that you see how the protests are going through?

DC: I think it's interesting where people's loyalties lie, like the people that I see that are actively against the Black Lives Matter protests and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole, they don't stand to gain anything from the movements not being, being there.

BD: Yeah. What have you seen your peers doing that inspires you?

DC: Well a lot of the people I went to high school with are part of this movement called Citizens Action, so they're the ones organizing the protests and they recently got a law pushed or passed in our county that would increase police accountability.

BD: Okay, that's really good. Are the members of these mainly white people or hispanic or other?

DC: It's mainly a mix of the hispanic and black kids and, well they aren't kids anymore I think of ourselves as kids, they are the hispanic and black people that I went to highschool with.

BD: Okay. That's really good. What do you think about cops' response to protests that began in May 2020?

DC: I think it's interesting how you as an officer can look at a protest saying "stop killing black people" and think that that's a personal attack on you doing your job.

BD: Can you be a little more specific?

DC: So, as I said before I know a couple of cops personally and there's this dialog going on where they no longer feel safe doing their jobs because of the protests and looking at the protests in the context of everything, seeing how these "riots" have sprung up, it's almost never actual protesters who are starting the riots it's people who come to cause trouble in the protests so, the fact that officers can look at that knowing that the people who are actually protesting aren't rioting and still try to push the narrative that protestors are all aggressive and they don't feel safe is kind of telling towards how they want things to turn.

BD: Yeah. What do you think about the local and national government's response to protests that began in May 2020?

DC: I mean I clearly have no trust in our government. I think it's disgusting how we have been protesting for so long and there's still no sign of any greater change.

BD: Can you be more specific?

DC: So we've been protesting since what, May?

BD: Yes.

DC: And although there's been change in like my county where police accountability is greater, have you seen anything federally that matches up to that?

BD: No, How would you like to see this movement resolved?

DC: Ideally I would like to see... I would like to see more integration of social work into the police system, I would like to see policing done not to punish blackness and poorness but to help communities or communities to be made better by the presence of police and if that's not feasible

at the very least I would like to see more racial sensitivity training and more firearm discipline within police forces as they are.

BD: What do you think your role would be in this... in achieving the outcome?

DC: As I stand right now all I really feel I can do is keep protesting and keep educating people when they try to challenge me and keep fighting for what I believe in.

BD: Okay. Is there anything else about the racist uprisings you'd like to share?

DC: I'm trying to think.

BD: If you need a second that's okay.

DC: I also think it's pretty interlocking at the discourse over Facebook about the protests like as you probably know my high school is very racially divided because of the area that I live in.

BD: Yeah.

DC: So, I would look at posts from the group that I'm apart of saying that they were going to March and there would be comments saying "You better not be in the streets or I'll run you over with my truck". Like just very clear threats to our personal safety for doing something that in no way, shape, or form harmed the person who posted that.

BD: You know what's funny though? Whenever... because you're my sister, whenever I go upstate with you it's always... we never see really people that stand out that way, so it's interesting they're showing their true colors like on Facebook instead of day to day life.

DC: Yeah I definitely think over here it's... I don't want to say it's less acceptable to be openly racist here because it's very clear people don't care anymore.

BD: Yeah.

DC: But the kind of racism that you'd experience over here it's insidious like it's a cop asking you if you actually live in your house when he sees your last name, it's people calling me Pocahontas because I was tan in middle school.

BD: And long hair.

DC: That too, yeah. (Equal laughter) Like I was in no way, shape, or form the darkest person but because of where I lived I was the darkest person in my area so, yeah.

BD: How do you feel as a passing Hispanic... oh we have sirens, sorry... how do you feel as a passing Hispanic having a brother that's blonde and blue eyed?

DC: So as a kid I used to hate the fact that Aaron (our brother) was blue eyed and I didn't because as a kid were taught that's the epitome of beauty for a lot of things as your eccentric

features so, me having my brown hair, brown eyes like I hated that and now seeing that Aaron can walk through the world and not really pay attention to what's going on that's... I feel like I have a responsibility to educate him on these things 'cause he's not willing to take the time to educate himself because he doesn't have to.

BD: Yeah... wait I heard you have the sniffles do you need a minute?

DC: I'm good, I just have a sinus infection

BD: Okay, just a couple more. Ready?

DC: Ready (child voice)

BD: During this year there have been a lot of issues specifically with the call of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic, and with both sides of the protest with the political party how have you found yourself dealing with these issues?

DC: Dealing with the issues in regard to what?

BD: With the issues of the virus, the protests on both sides of the political party

DC: I mean I think I'm as careful as everyone else in regards to like not going out, constantly washing my hands, I never leave my house without a mask.

BD: Okay.

DC: I think it's interesting to see how even after the tapes of Trump admitting that he downplayed the deadliness of the virus, people are still willing to support him and I think they see the protests as an attack on them because that's all they've ever known is if you say white pride you're attacking black peoples but if you say black pride it's not attacking white people and they don't seem to get that.

BD: Yeah, can you elaborate a little more?

DC: Okay so growing up I heard a lot of people complaining about BET and why there's not a white entertainment and I think a lot of it stems from segregation and seeing how when they separated things it was specifically to exclude people but what they don't realize is when they excluded most of the population the population had nothing to do but create their own spaces because they weren't allowed in many of the spaces that were there.

BD: Yeah, I find it interesting that we as a people have over time kind of shunned and gone against the immigrants that were once here, since America is founded on immigrants none of us we're supposed to be here but the Native Americans and we took this angle of the white people, the white European people are the best and that's it and we've taken it so far even to this day. To say that anyone of color well, who isn't a white European isn't the best. How- How do you... Do you disagree or agree with this?

DC: I think America is definitely interesting in our brand of racism 'cause a little bit is Eurocentric beliefs and the idea of manifest destiny and a little bit- a lot of it is classism, we see immigrants that come here and instead of opening up a hedge fund they decide to work in a meat packing plant and we look down on that and we say they're dirty and therefore all immigrants that color are dirty and I think that, that's very harmful and it perpetuates the idea that the only "good people" are white rich people or "wasps".

BD: Yeah. Since you've previously stated you went to some of the Black Lives Matter protests held in your city, how did you keep yourself and others around you safe, that there's a pandemic and you've said you stay six feet apart. How do you really ensure the safety of yourself and others during these mass collections of people?

DC: Apart of it is staying six feet apart and wearing your mask, I definitely had a bucket of hand sanitizer at my disposal, also I think the part the fact that it was held outside definitely helped like there's not a whole lot of enclosed spaces for you to be in. Knowing that the virus isn't airborne and is spread through droplets so, I felt pretty safe if I was in any way immunocompromised I wouldn't have gone just because that's an extra layer of danger that they don't need but I'm lucky enough that no one in my family or my care was in that position.

BD: Okay, I'm glad. Can you go into more depth about your experience with the protest?

DC: Sure, so as you know Kingston is a pretty historic city, it was the first capital of New York. So, we gathered in Academy Green Park which is this little triangle park but it has statues of the founders of Kingston so, Stuyvesant and some other old white dudes that I don't care to remember their names and as our keynote speakers were speaking about it they were like you know acknowledging the history of Kingston and how these men had slaves, and how our community was sort of built on the idea that black people were inferior and working to change that. I think the most immortalizing thing about the whole protest was seeing the people who were driving and very clearly not supporting and were very vocal about that.

BD: Yeah. I know you've mentioned driving home from wherever and seeing a bunch of people with picket signs saying that they're Trump supporters, how does that make you feel as someone who identifies as both white and Hispanic?

DC: I think at this point anyone who supports Trump, is not looking for their best interest because he's not only downplayed the deadliness of the virus he's made sure that we can never really grow as a country because of his racism and because he's no intent on dividing the nation and I remember in the 2016 election when we were all joking about him because he was on The Apprentice, we all sort of saw him as harmless and stupid because he's a celebrity and I think we were all very wrong about him 'cause he's not harmless he might be stupid, I don't know. The harm that he's done has surpassed even my greatest fears.

BD: How so?

DC: Alright so, the most recent development in the Trump nightmare horror show, was his pick for Supreme Court Amy C. Barret, and I don't remember who said it but one of my friends was like if Amy C. Barret was Muslim and has the same record as she does now, Trump would be calling her a terrorist and saying that she's a firm supporter of Sharia Law, but because she's Christian and she wants to impose her beliefs on people it's seen as okay and that sets a really bad precedent for people like in terms of reproductive rights and bodily autonomy.

BD: Going back to the Muslim law you were talking about isn't Sharia Law just about kind of a moral standing for those people of color and people are Muslim meaning they just they follow the law of the land?

DC: So, Sharia Law is just a sort of moral code like the Ten Commandments stuff like that the disparity comes from places like Saudi Arabia where Sharia Law is like extremized.

BD: Extremized, is that a word?

DC: It's pushed extremists to be something that it's not so, and Islam women have the choice to cover their hair with the hijab, in Saudi Arabia it's not a choice for them it's forced upon them.

BD: Yeah.

DC: So if the disparity comes from seeing that and instead of saying extremists Islam-Islamic laws we say Sharia Law.

BD: Okay, Why did you feel it was important to go to these protests during a pandemic, possibly risking your health to fight for this cause?

DC: I think it comes down to not living in a vacuum like I knew that it was a risk that I was taking but I also knew that if I didn't show up and if no one showed up then people would be able to use that and say that it's not a problem and nothing needs to change and that to me was scarier than potentially catching a virus.

BD: How does this cause affect you and your loved ones or your family?

DC: So my family is definitely very mixed, I have my cop cousin who hasn't really spoken out about everything that's been going on so I can't speak as to how he's feeling, and then I have a lot of cousins who are black who have talked to me about feeling unsafe before all of this started happening. So, being able to see both sides and seeing how one side is definitely more affected is definitely eye opening.

BD: Oh, as my sister recently there was a time you and I went farther upstate to hang out whatever, and do you remember the person who was racially profiling me, your sister? How did that make you feel?

DC: I was definitely angered by it. I was also very surprised because I personally have never experienced anything like that. 'Cause that's where we used to vacation all of the time so seeing

that we could exist in the same space and you can have so much of a harder time than I could kinda hurt because you're my sister and I love you and I don't wanna see that happen to anyone but least of all you.

BD: That's cute. Alright, last question; Do you feel you made a difference by being at the protest and if so in what way?

DC: I mean, I feel like I did my part. I'm only one person so I can't say that you know my being there really made or broke the protest but you know a flood is only a bunch of raindrops put together so.

BD: I like that. Alright, well thank you very much Desiree for participating in this interview. Anything to say to the people in the back?

DC: Hi Bianca's Professor give her an A. (Equal laughter)

BD: Alright, let me stop this.