An Interview with Rianna Walcott

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Abstract: This is an interview with Rianna Walcott, the co-founder of *Project Myopia* – a student-led initiative to decolonise university curricula. The discussion explores the difference between 'diversity' and 'decolonisation': how these two concepts relate to and contradict one another. Walcott outlines some of the recent student efforts to 'decolonise' the university and we discuss the extent to which this represents a paradoxical ambition, as well as the limitations of attempting to change the university from the *inside.* Walcott also explores the significance of some practical measures which can be – or have been – put into place when attempting to diversify or decolonise curricula, and we close by discussing the significance of Philosophy in particular with respect to decolonising efforts, and the steps which need to be taken in order to begin the process of 'decolonising' philosophy.

Keywords: diversity, decolonisation, teaching, curricula, activism, students.

Introduction

Rianna Walcott is the co-founder of *Project Myopia* – a student-led initiative to decolonise university curricula. Project Myopia gathers curriculum suggestions which have been crowdsourced from students. Students gather and present their suggestions within a semi-academic essay, which details the significance of their suggested work to their personal experience and why they believe it would make a worthy addition to their curriculum. The suggestions contained within the Project Myopia website site cover a range of formats: visual, literary, cinematic, musical, etc. Project Myopia primarily aims to address the distinctive lack of works written or created by LGBTQ people, women, non-binary people, differently abled people or people of colour contained on syllabuses. Whilst it would have been possible to approach these issues in a way which may have been more palatable to a wider academic audience, I felt it was more important to capture the first-person perspective of an activist who has worked on the ground to bring these issues to wider public attention. With this in mind, I suggest that the following discussion is read not as an attempt to produce a systematic defence of these recent student-led efforts, but instead as a means of providing a deeper insight into some of the experiences of university education that have motivated student activism in this area and what it aims to achieve – as well as some of the theoretical and practical tensions that have arisen in the course of carrying out these ambitions. With the exception of a few minor editorial cuts in order to avoid repetition, etc., what follows is a verbatim transcription – an uncensored portrayal of our discussion.

1. Can you start by telling us a bit about yourself and what *Project Myopia* is?

I am a PhD student at King's College London and I research race and social media. In particular I look at how black people use social networks and how we represent blackness in those spaces: how we represent ourselves and the linguistic or syntactical definers of race – discourse analysis, etc. I am also a teaching assistant in the Digital Humanities Department here at King's and my undergrad and masters were both in English lit at Edinburgh. While I was there, along with my co-founder of Project Myopia, we both noticed that going through the English literature undergrad we felt that it was inadequate and incomplete. We felt that there was a real problem with the fact that, depending on which courses you had chosen, you could get to the end having barely touched any work by POC or queer people – there was a real way in which all of the 'diverse' offerings were pigeon-holed in the last year of honours. So you could choose maybe one course on queering the canon or one course on Afro-American literature. And that was it. And if you chose not to take that one course you could quite easily finish your degree without touching that huge part of the canon.

So, we were trying to challenge what the canon actually is. Even though universities and a lot of other places ostensibly do not subscribe to the idea of a 'canon', in actual fact when we're creating curricula for undergrads you've got to kind of take a holistic look at course and say: well, what is the reason it's unimportant for them to read a black theorist before their final year? What – they can't 'handle' it before they're 21? It's quite strange. So we basically wanted to devote some resources to amending that kind of problem. We then secured some funding from an IIG grant and we set up a website and some social media platforms and we asked students to write us essays on what they wished had been on their curriculums. The only caveat was that whatever they recommended had to be by a scholar or a person who was from a marginalised background. We had people recommending things far and wide: albums that are great examples of post-colonialism; we had people saying "oh you should put *Chewing Gum* on film and TV courses"; all sorts of things, not just things that are considered to be narrowly academic.

It was really wonderful, and we have since been striving to expand our disciplinary reach – because it's a project that lends itself more towards the arts and humanities than it does to STEM [science, technology, engineering and medicine] and me and Toby were both from English lit and we're aware that our frame of reference is quite narrow, and we've since been working to ensure that there is a true interdisciplinary offering there. So we've had interviews with senior doctors of at UCL and they were interviewed about the racist history of certain medicine. We had someone from economics write us a piece about feminism and Adam Smith. And then more recently, if we're thinking about a decolonised curriculum. Before we started thinking about the difference between diversity and decolonisation, we were just thinking: what would we have wanted more of? What did we need to see? As students what did we need in

that space we were existing in? Alongside all that, for the last year or two I have been running workshops for graduate teaching assistants, thinking about how to make that classroom, that space, as liberated as possible: as free as possible from micro-aggressions; a safe and productive environment to learn in. We're aware of BAME attainment gaps, so we've got to think about not just what is being taught but also how it's being taught and who is in the room when it's being taught. And how can we make sure that that space is hospitable for scholars who are already marginalised.

2. With that in mind, can you say a little bit about how GTAs can make sure that the classroom is a space in which all students can develop themselves equally?

Well, I think part of it is about the kind of classroom environment you foster. I can speak from my experience of being a student: there are some people who believe that the university – in their sort of conflation of free speech with the 'offensive as you can be speech' – they tend to conflate, or say that the classroom is not a political space. Whereas I say the complete opposite space. I say that the classroom is the *most* political space, I say bring your politics here, don't leave it at the door. And to say that the classroom is an apolitical space sort of assumes that you are the *neutral.* Only a cis-het white man can say that something is not political because they're the only ones that can supersede identity and speak as if we're all like floating atoms and talk about things in a purely theoretical way. So philosophy, for instance: one of our questions in the workshop is based on an experience that a student actually had. It is about Heidegger, the notorious antisemite, and how a tutor didn't know that Heidegger was actually an antisemite and then a student brings it up and the tutor goes, well its not really relevant to this lesson, so we're going to park it. And it's about saying: well, what does that do to your classroom? That choice that you've made to say, well, we're going to leave that at the door, what have you then communicated about the way your classroom works? What have you communicated about how academia as a whole works? Because who gets to supersede those things? Who gets to be the David Humes and Heideggers? They only get to be there, to occupy that space, *because* they're straight white men, and we don't think about all the people whose contributions to philosophy have been completely ignored. And they just get to be, you know, we're all just like, 'oh the Enlightenment blah blah blah'… . So, it's all political – right?

3. How do you respond to those people who simply say that these kinds of changes are impractical? Who say that if we took all the philosophers off the syllabus who held problematic views there would be no canonical figures left to teach, no time to contextualise them, etc.?

[Laughs] Well, it tells you what they hope to espouse doesn't it. It tells you who they expect to have in their classrooms. You know, they establish these so-called 'global cultures' and pretend like "oh we're a university, we're really global", and then they do something like this: they tell people who is and is not welcome. I often use the example of David Hume. When he's writing during the Enlightenment about Man, at this point when he's writing he literally doesn't think I'm a human! So how can I talk about his philosophy as being any kind of universal enquiry into anything when *I know* that he doesn't think I'm a real person. All this stuff that he's supposedly speaking about with respect to humanity, he's not talking about me – because he doesn't think I'm real! So how can I engage with that? *Who* can engage with that? I think I'm just clear with these people. I say that if they want to do that – and say that this kind of stuff is irrelevant – then they are actually already asking students to make a choice, its just that they don't think they are. Asking students to put these things aside is a choice: that's an academic choice that you're making! So if I choose to write about Hume as though he was talking about me, I've chosen to ignore something very fundamental to the whole way that Hume thought. Something that is not accurate. If you don't teach it, you're asking people to rewrite history in this cycle of immortalising these people, as they were *not*. You're asking us to ignore stuff. You are denying us the fullness and richness of an actual academic education.

I think this is one of the central problems with regard to decolonisation: people's imaginations are simply not radical enough. I just think, look, if you simply cannot imagine teaching anything different, then you have no business teaching! You can't look at these mistakes and think "oh, maybe we should do this differently for the next generation?". Then what's the point? What are you doing in academia? F**k off, go do something else. This is it: go! You have to think about undergraduates as the next scholars and you're teaching them things that they then have to unlearn in order to do good work. They're going to have to go through this whole process of unlearning all the nonsense so why not just do it correctly from the get-go? If you think that talking about Hume's politics is too time-consuming and you won't have enough time to get through his philosophy, then maybe you need to narrow your focus a bit, maybe you need to just cover less people. Maybe you need to spend a whole semester on why Hume was such a prick. Let's think options here! I think people are too tied up in traditional course structures, thinking that we need to have three lectures a week and we need to go through three philosophers in a month and … But I mean, if you don't have time, then well …

This is the thing as well, I've noticed that there are certain figures that you do over and over again throughout the course of your academic education and every time you do them you learn a little bit more and then a little bit more. I remember when I did Thomas Carlyle at the start of my undergrad, and then I did him again during my masters and found out that the man was a huge racist. We did him again but in a completely different context. We studied him first as a

Scottish poet, you know, we read some nice epic poetry, and then came back to him in year five – when I was taking this black Atlantic fiction course – and learnt about him as a notorious racist. He literally has a big old paper titled Occasional Discourses on the [N-word] Question, and I'm like, so you had me writing about him all lah-di-dah Edinburgh, and then five years later I have to have this huge betrayal and if I hadn't taken this *masters* course I never would have known about this! So what does that say about the completeness of my education? What does that say about what we do and do not find important? Because to a lot of us race is a very important area of study. By saying actually this isn't relevant right now, actually they're saying, they don't give a f**k about race.

4. I think this brings us on really nicely to one of the central questions I wanted to ask you about: what do you think the difference is between decolonisation and diversity?

At this point they're both meaningless buzzwords. But I want to talk about them as *I* think they are. I mentioned earlier that before I started thinking about these kinds of theoretical questions, I just wanted to make academia a bit better for people like me, and also for me. I wanted to see people who looked like me, I wanted to hear from people who were like me, and I wanted to get a stable and secure job. So that's it: that's all I wanted, initially. Now whether or not that's about diversity or decolonisation, those are always my core wants and needs – without dressing it up any further. But when we talk about diversity, I think the reason why it sounds and feels a little hollow – and I think the reason why people are now incorrectly leaping on to the term 'decolonisation' – is that it's all about simply having more options but that doesn't actually mean that there's been any fundamental change to the structures made at all. So, for instance, there might be more black undergrads, but the attainment gap will still be strong. So even if you came in with the same A levels as a fellow white person, they're still more likely to get a first than you are, as a black person. Simply having more black people doesn't change that fact; what does change that is actually changing the environment of the university. So diversity is: more of us. Decolonisation is actually unravelling some of the harmful colonial practices that underpin the Eurocentric western education system in the first place. So, another way of putting it is, when they were tearing down statues of David Hume in Edinburgh, diversity would have just been putting up more statues of black people around them. Decolonisation is tearing it down, right? Not just putting up more ones.

5. How do you think they would play out as separate concepts with respect to the curriculum?

Yeah, I'm often quite hesitant about describing what we do at Project Myopia because of this tension. Sometimes I do think that we are verging more towards 'diversifying' the curriculum because we're simply offering more things rather

than asking for… but that's not *just* what we're doing. So, with respect to both I would say that we diversify our curriculums by offering more opportunity to study marginalised scholars, and we speak about decolonising our curriculums by asking people about what is *already* there. Asking people to read things in new lights, to challenge what they are being taught, to challenge the structures of the ways they are being taught. It's not about offering more options so that you can have more options of things that fit within the status quo; it's about changing that status quo.

6. How do the modes of praxis differ between the two, for someone advocating diversity versus someone advocating decolonisation?

I would honestly say that most people don't know about the difference or don't care about the difference. I mean, I feel like black people in the diversity and decolonisation business are often grappling with this concept because it does often feel like something that is impossible. How do you decolonise the institution – the site of colonialism and imperialism? Is it even a possibility? That's why I sort of wanted to dumb it right down to making university a place I can exist in. Whether I should or shouldn't bother is a totally different question. If the answer is that I shouldn't have bothered, then … that's just too much [laughs]. It's a very complicated question. And I wonder if it's even a question that even has that much value in asking, because we ask it and: then what? Am I going to stop? It's unlikely… Melz, the founder of the Free Black University, started with 'why is my curriculum white?' in Leeds and it was very much about working inside the institution, a decolonisation movement again, but it was about revealing a lot of the wrongs that people on the curriculum had committed. You know, talking about revitalising the curriculum – and it actually led to the creation of one of the first Black British History courses. That's a decolonisation movement that works within the institution.

Since then, I know Melz has been dissatisfied with some of that so has started the Free Black Uni, an organisation that really tries to create from scratch a decolonised institution. Thinking about what it means to be a university, what it means to be a provider of knowledge: creating their own journal, their own space. I know looking at something like that the question on the tip of everyone's tongue is: how do you do that without reinventing the wheel? How do you do that in a way that really reflects a decolonised institution? Like, how do you actually do that? It's not something anyone has done yet. I do have faith that Melz's Free Black Uni will be different. But people are thinking about what makes that different to an HBCU [historically Black college/university]. Like, an HBCU is a perfect example of something that probably thought it was going to be different but then just became the same sh*t with black paint. So, when you embark on this kind of thing you do have to think very carefully about how it's going to be done.

7. Do you think the phrase 'decolonising the university' is simply a paradox?

Yes, I do think it's a paradox. And I think we should use a different phrase. I know a lot of people get very upset about using the phrase incorrectly because we're not necessarily using the term in the way, say, Fannon was using it so I do think maybe we should use a different phrase. I think there are many useful things we can do, I don't know if that's the be-all. One of the things I've decided about my life is that I will not live it all in theory. I think it's much easier in this culture to just say "well no, you can't do it". For me, I'd much rather do *something* or feel like I was doing something than just say "well it can't be done" and then do nothing. So, it's about what you derive joy from and for me this is it. I also think that we can talk all we want about … we can dream and imagine this better institution but by chipping away at it we aren't saying that we can't also burn it down? So, for me, you know saying that I'm anti-capitalist doesn't stop me from paying my rent every month. I still have to exist under this system, right? I feel the same way about decolonisation initiatives, so I understand that the kind of work that we do is probably not what was intended when we started theorising about decoloniality. But what am I going to do? Should I just keep studying *The Great Gatsby* four times and calling that a degree? What should I do? Especially if we've been so embarrassing for the institutions that they're willing to throw money and attention our way. We'd be foolish not to capitalise on that.

8. Can you tell us a bit more about the student activism that has gone on surrounding decolonising the university? What have students actually been asking for?

Well I can only really speak for my experience and the other activists I've known. I think this is really condensing it down – but I guess I would still like to condense it down – to what we're learning, who is learning it, and who is teaching it. That to me seems to be three very important strands of what students are asking for. I guess though, everything is on the table, if you're thinking about activism – students were also campaigning for fair pay, pensions, lowered accommodation fees. You know, everything is up for grabs. I guess one thing that is really important for me is looking to change the culture in academia surrounding mental health. The university shouldn't be something that you go through and come out the other side with your mental health in shreds. There are some very deep changes that the university needs to go through to be less of a source of trauma … and you'll always find students heading these things; by the time you're an academic you sort of get sucked into the machine of doing way too much work and way more work than you're actually paid for. And anything you *can* do is only being done in your free time. Lord knows those things are only being undertaken by the already overwhelmed and underpaid BME academics. So, I would say most of the organising that goes on is student-organised.

I think the demands are pretty clear. We just want things to be better [laughs]. Stop doing so much bad sh*t! And I think there's a similar question that people raise when they hear about the curriculum stuff, like, "what do we do instead of all this bad sh*t?" And that's actually why we created Project Myopia because we wanted to come away from that question. We were really fed up of asking for change and getting nothing. I think that's something a lot of movements do lack: tangible outcomes. It can be less fulfilling than reimaging a whole university and being really idealistic about stuff. Sometimes, though, there's just something very satisfying about someone asking you "oh well what *will* I replace T.S. Elliot with?" and then just being able to go "well have you looked here? Because this person would fit on your course". That was the real starting point of Project Myopia, we just wanted to stop all the talking and start something, so that there was no longer any excuse. Now it's like: well now why can't you do it? We've just crowd-sourced all this stuff from students – now what?

9. You mentioned something very interesting earlier about the watering down of 'decolonisation' to mean something akin to a form of Liberal tokenism, and I was wondering, do you think there's a place for reclaiming the term or do you think we would be better just to scrap it completely?

Well, I think the tension of using decoloniality in the way that it is being used, where it becomes so insulting, is when universities say they're doing it, because it comes from a Black radical tradition. It's sort of like calling yourself an 'ally'. You know, whether or not you *are* one is irrelevant: I hate you [laughs]. It's just not something you get to call *yourself.* I think for me, the absolute anathema for me, is when an institution says they're decolonising – that disgusts me. An institution can't decolonise itself! It's supposed to be dragged kicking and screaming. For an institution to truly decolonise itself they would have to hit the self-destruct button and they're not doing that, they're offering us pennies. And that's when it becomes offensive – embarrassing, even. It becomes embarrassing to be allied with that. I guess for the sake of my own sense of shame I would prefer if people were to use a different word. If people are doing just diversity measures, just use 'diversity' and then we can critique it if we want. You only get to call it decolonisation if there's a real culture change, a real huge change to what you're doing. Unless you're an elite university that's giving out free education or making your sh*t truly accessible to the masses. Unless you can honestly say that you're no longer reinscribing class systems, racialised inequalities, gender inequalities – which no one can honestly say they're not doing. So don't use it.

10. Do you think philosophy has a particular role to play in terms of 'decolonising' the academy?

Well… I'm not a philosopher [laughs] so I'll be careful about what I say here. One of the things I would like to say is that with philosophy being one of those very 'pure' degrees, people still have respect for the – very serious – philosophy degrees. I think it's an area that is very accessible to a particular brand of white man, I think the tendency to reinscribe colonial tendencies is much easier to do in philosophy than it is in other fields. I think of the disciplines that really need to change and the real big players are philosophy, psychology, and English. Those are the real 'bad boys' that *a lot* that needs to be changed in. That is the trend with 'pure' disciplines. I guess because you're looking so much at epistemologies and schools of thought, philosophers just retain this God-like status where more than anyone else you can't challenge them. It's the same when people talk about Shakespeare: there's this reaction of "how *dare* you suggest we take Shakespeare off the syllabus?". Which I have never said but people keep accusing me of [laughs]. It is not something you can suggest: you ruin your whole cause [laughs]. Look you're better off just not talking about Shakespeare. I feel like people feel very similarly about certain philosophers, you know, to even *imagine* having a philosophy course that doesn't include Kant is just so far out of the realm of possibility. Philosophy's one of those fields where the imagination is a lot more necessary than in other fields.

So my field, for instance, digital humanities, it's still relatively young – this is by no means to say that there aren't any problems because there are a lot of problems – but everyone writing in the field now has only been writing in it since the 80's. So all the big names are still alive and therefore challengeable. It's not the same as talking about old-beardy-what's-his-face because those guys are untouchable. They're saints. And that's something that I think is prevalent in philosophy and I just want to say, well, you lot need to get over that [laughs] and start actually looking at some other people, from other parts of the world. I think the narrowness of what we care about and Eurocentricity and our cultural thought systems are so glaring in areas in philosophy, and if you're not able to be reflexive about that then you're just never going to get anywhere. So, I suppose that's what I'd have to say about philosophy in *particular*. Self-reflexivity is so important. Anthropology is a good example of a discipline that has managed this well because it started out being the *most* colonial thing you could possibly do [laughs]. Literally going to other parts of the world, observing them, and commentating on how "it's not like the way we do it". Philosophy really needs to do stuff like that. Really take a look at its origins and where it's ended up, and just say: it's time to imagine more.

11. Any final words or things you would like us to alert people to?

Well, *Project Myopia* will be hiring people again at the end of the summer and we're looking to expand. We're also looking for people to write articles on issues related to this discussion. Also, keep an eye out for updates. There will also be a symposium held during Semester 2 which brings together activists from all the different strands of the decolonising movements. I hope this will also function as a networking event which brings together people from a breadth of different universities and institutions.