EP05_BetweenAcrossThrough_WalcottDiversity

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00:03 Ianeke Romero: You're listening to Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:22 IR: We always hear about the firsts: The first woman to fly a plane, the first indigenous Member of Parliament, the first Black president of the United States. They are supposed to be trailblazers. Supposedly, they open the doors to minorities just like them. But how often does this actually happen? How often does it change the system, and how many people actually get to follow? Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill, director of the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies, speaks with Professor Rinaldo Walcott from the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies at the University of Toronto in a conversation about the dangers of the language of multiculturalism, which makes it very difficult to be the first without being the last. Please join us as we travel Between, Across, and Through.

01:15 Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill: Welcome. I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill. And I'm speaking with Professor Rinaldo Walcott. Thank you for joining us. Rinaldo, your research has an interesting title, The End of Diversity. Why'd you name it this?

01:27 Professor Rinaldo Walcott: Yeah. I called that particular essay The End of Diversity because I was trying to intervene into all of the ways in which I felt that notions and practices of diversity within institutions like universities, art galleries, museums, and in the general public discourse had produced this idea that the more non-white people sit in that table cement that systematic and institutional change was happening. And I wanted to point out that that wasn't the case. But I also wanted to make the claim that, in the post-Barack Obama era, that the kind of rhetoric around the exceptional non-white person should be brought to an end as quickly as possible.

02:17 PO: In the essay, the United States plays a very important role intellectually for you, or analytically for you. What is the role of the United States in this conversation about diversity?

02:25 PW: So, I think that one of the things that's really interesting is that even though Canada has an official multicultural policy and has, since the '70s, branded itself and especially its major cities as some of the most multicultural in the world and so on, that the rhetoric and the discourse, and even the practice of some idea of multiculturalisms often still takes its lead from what happens in the US, a place that doesn't have an official multicultural policy, and that, in fact, at the vernacular level, sees itself as a melting pot, as opposed to being a multicultural nation. So that's why, for me, it's really difficult not to read what's happening in Canada through what's happening in the US. And, of course, we're all living in the era of the US empire. So there's a way in which what happens at the imperial centre impacts what happens in the peripheries and the margins. But secondly, because I write through the lens of Black studies and through the lens of Black diaspora studies, I often find myself turning to the US and trying to figure out what's happening with Black communities and populations there as a way of thinking about how to address what I see are similar questions, but often with different articulations happening in the Canadian nation space.

03:47 PO: Is it fair to say that the US is a global leader in the sense of whether it's a global leader in

white supremacist attitudes, or a global leader in conversations about assimilation? Canada's relationship to the US is critical, I suppose, here.

04:06 PW: It's definitely critical. I think the question of leader and leadership is an interesting one. When I think... How it works for me is that there's a set of contradictions. So there's a way in which if I go back to this idea that the US doesn't have an official multicultural policy, but Canada has one. But yet there's a way in which one can imagine forms of Black life in the US that would never be possible in Canada, so we've already invoked Barack Obama. We can't still imagine a Black prime minister of Canada. But yet, the US has already had a Black president. And it's those contradictions that I'm often trying to think about and work with in my research, and some of those contradictions sit behind what I was trying to do with this essay as well.

04:56 PO: And in your essay, you say that, "White people collectively lie to themselves," so they can believe life and social organization, as it stands, gives everyone equal opportunity. How is that kind of collective consciousness achieved?

05:09 PW: Well, I think it's achieved in a bunch of ways. One is that there's just this general idea that the democratic nation state that we live in is necessarily an egalitarian nation state. And people who veer away from saying that it's an egalitarian nation state are often denounced in the strongest terms, or simply dismissed and sidelined as irrelevant to the conversation. The conversation proceeds as though there's not opposition and protest to the idea that we live in an egalitarian society. And while I think that sometimes part of the contradiction with comparing, say, Canada and the US is that their space is in the US nation space where they're willing to admit that egalitarianism is an ideal, but has not been reached.

05:58 PO: Right. Right, right.

06:00 PW: And that opens up a different set of kinds of possibilities that I think are often shut down in the Canadian nation state.

06:07 PO: And so in the Canadian nation state... As someone from the United States, I can see how there could be pushback here in Canada against the idea that there are pockets where egalitarianism is an ideal, but not yet achieved. And you feel like that's a strong sense here in Canada?

06:20 PW: Yeah. I feel that the rhetoric of Canada is one of egalitarianism, even though there's a lot of evidence to prove that it doesn't exist. Whether we're thinking about indigenous communities, whether we're thinking about Black communities in both urban and rural areas, just generally speaking that there's more possibility of beginning from a place of non-egalitarianism in the US context. We should immediately acknowledge that indigenous people and Black people are at the lowest rungs of the society, are excluded from all kinds of institutions, and then there will be the rhetoric of, "You can become something." While in Canada, the conversation is shut down immediately by saying, "No, this is who we are, and we are egalitarian society."

07:01 PO: Interesting. Right. Barack Obama's dominant narrative was this kind of self-conscious reflection on even me from Kansas and...

07:10 PW: Exactly. He called it the improbable narrative.

07:12 PO: That's right. That's right, the improbable narrative. Absolutely. How could this collective consciousness be disrupted?

07:19 PW: Well, I think part of what I was trying to do in that essay is to disrupt it by revealing that whiteness is an operative structure in Canada. And that the default in Canada is whiteness. It's a particular sense of something that we might call European-ness, and that the languages of diversity and equity and inclusion, while necessary and while languages that came out of non-white people struggling to create a more egalitarian society, that those languages have now become a way to paper over the ongoing inequalities of the society.

07:51 PO: Sure. Yeah, I mean, your language of adjunct is interesting. In your paper, you reference the term "junior partner." Can you say a little bit more about what you mean by junior partner?

08:00 PW: So I borrowed the term "junior partners" from the African-American scholar and artist, Frank Wilderson III. And what Frank Wilderson is trying to get at by using that term is to say that even in the absence of white people to enact the structure of white supremacy, that non-white people, whom he termed "junior partners", can also act in that way. And so part of what I was suggesting by my own use of it is that often in the offices of diversity and so on, that the people who occupy those offices... Not necessarily consciously, but just given the way in which the structures work, become junior partners and maintain the system as it is.

08:38 PO: So Barack... I don't know. I've never thought of it this way. Is Barack Obama part of this kind of universe, or is it...

08:46 PW: Yes, he would be a principal and symbolic, massively symbolic, figure of being a junior partner in terms of US empire, right? That US empire can have a Black man, a man who represents some of the most oppressed people globally, whether we're talking about the African continent, North America, the Caribbean, wherever Black people live... Be the face of empire, be the face of global terror, oppression, global capital, global inequality. So yeah, he embodies that junior partnership in some ways. But I want to get at a much more micro level, which is to say that when we make a case for entering institutions like universities, museums, art galleries, institutions are not gonna fundamentally change, but they've been able to accommodate some of us who were traditionally excluded. That we become a part of maintaining and reproducing something that harms large numbers of people from communities that we come from, and yet at the same time, we also become examples of those institutions appearing to be doing good work.

10:02 PO: Right. Your language of the difference between changing and accommodating seems really important.

10:06 PW: Yes.

10:08 PO: How do you begin to reject this narrative as a Black professor here at the University of

Toronto?

10:13 PW: The first thing that I do, and it took me a long time to get to this point, is to recognize that I myself, too, must live with a contradiction. And the contradiction is that yes, in relationship to the ways in which our society structures a set of hierarchies, in relationship to a series of communities, whether they're Black communities, queer communities, someone like myself finds himself in a different relation.

10:41 PO: Sure.

10:43 PW: 'Cause I don't wanna say hierarchy or I don't wanna say privilege, because I don't think that those really capture it. But I find myself in a different relation to some of the communities that I come from, and so I have to live with that contradiction. But I also feel that what I try to do is to speak with those communities as well. So I don't speak for them, I'm not a representative of them, but I'm a member of those communities who's trying to bring the concerns, and the interests, and the desires, and the hopes of those communities into these institutions, into an institution like University of Toronto. And hopefully to disrupt it enough so that I'm not the only one, and so that I'm not the last one. Yeah.

11:21 PO: Right. And with the contradictions you speak about, and the language of adjunct and junior partnership, all that is the conditions of which are set by the language and the ideology of diversity. There's an idea out there that when someone from a marginalized or a racialized group gets an important position, for example, becomes a professor or a CEO, it should be celebrated as an advancement for the whole group. How do you feel about that?

11:46 PW: Right. And that's one of the principal contradictions that I hope to unwork in my larger research projects, which is that there are a bunch of factors that play into that. One is, it depends upon that individual person's politics how you might read their own contributions. But I think it's really dangerous to take individual people as representative of larger communities and groups. And so in my own work, I've tried to undo that by making the case that symbolic representation is never enough, and that numeric representation is never enough either. So that what we need is symbolic, numeric, and political practices and structures that involve people other than those groups that seem to be of-interest groups. And so what that means is that, for instance, I'll use this example, if we wanted Black studies to appear and have a viable life at University of Toronto, we would need Black students, Black scholars, and other communities' commitment to something called Black studies who are not Black, right?

12:53 PO: Yes. Right. Right, right, right.

12:54 PW: And that that commitment has to be a commitment that's founded in what the anthropologist and philosopher, Alphonso Lingis used the phrase, "What does it mean to care for people with whom you share nothing in common?" So that sentence is the underlying philosophical approach to the work that I do.

13:13 PO: Right. And part of that means not, I don't know, celebrating or romanticizing the

individual actions of one person or accomplishments of one person?

13:23 PW: Exactly.

13:26 PO: That runs counter to so much, at least within the US context, right? That where these individuals then become, as you say, symbolic.

13:33 PW: Yeah. And it is true that there's less of that in the Canadian context at a certain level, but at other levels, they are. So, for instance, in Ontario, they have something called Lincoln Alexander Day. And Lincoln Alexander was a Black Conservative politician. And now that he's passed away and we have that day, he's often revered for all kinds of firsts. But he was also the kind of individual that one would not necessarily mark as being representative of collective Black desires in the Province of Ontario. So there's a way in which these symbolic figures can be recovered and revered and celebrated for the very thing that they were not actually doing.

14:20 PO: Right. Right, right, right.

14:21 PW: And he's a good example of how that particular kind of practice has become a part of the Canadian landscape as well.

14:29 PO: It seems also like a fundamental issue between the one and the many, right? So for you and your research, it's progress for the individual, progress... I guess it's not necessarily progress for all.

14:38 PW: Not at all. I've been writing about Canadian multiculturalism now for about 20 years. My Master's work was on Canadian multicultural policy. And even back then, I was arguing that Canadian multicultural policy was about individualizing, that it takes the rhetoric... I was speaking to groups, so we talk about Black people, we talk about South Asian people, we talk about visible minorities. We take these collective approaches to marking out populations, but it's really about individuality. And back then... And I still continue to make the case, that a radical multiculturalism is a multiculturalism that is about advancing collectivities and not individuals.

15:20 PO: Right, right.

15:21 PW: If you look at, for instance, Charter challenges in the Canadian context, a group of people can't really bring a Charter challenge. A Charter challenge comes vis-a-vis an individual. So, it's an individual who wants to join the RCMP, and they're saying that you can't wear a turban, who can bring the challenge, and then that opens up for other people to be able, if they're successful, to be able to join the RCMP. But it can never be begun as, let's say, the Sikh communities or Sikh communities are gonna bring a challenge.

15:48 PO: Interesting.

15:48 PW: It always has to be an individual.

15:50 PO: Yes, yes. How do politics of recognition play into all this?

15:54 PW: Yeah. The politics of recognition's a really slippery eel in all of this. Because these symbolic figures, who are often recognized as having achieved some notion of success within the normative, are often offered up to the rest of us as figures that we should emulate. So recognition of an individual is offered up as recognition also of entire communities. And that's the one which, for instance, a conservative figure like Lincoln Alexander has been recouped. But, for instance, at a level like, let's say right now, the Minister of Immigration, Ahmed Hussen, who's a Somali-Canadian. He, too, is offered up in that similar fashion as a symbolic... No, as more than a symbol. As the actual representation of what you too can become. But we know that most people can't become that.

16:55 PO: Sure.

16:56 PW: There's only one Minister of Immigration, right?

17:00 PO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

17:00 PW: And we also know that the vast majority of Somalis who actually arrive in Canada end up having working class lives, and they're not able to vault the kinds of experiences that he was able to vault, to arrive at the place where you can become the Federal Minister of Immigration in Canada. So there's a way in which recognition is used to keep people hoping and desiring, but also to keep them in place.

17:23 PO: It's so interesting, 'cause even within basic political thought, recognition is foundational for rights, although you're pointing out that it's also a mechanism of, I don't know what you would say, control or management or something.

17:37 PW: Well let me... One of the things that... In some of my earlier work, I've tried to parse this question of recognition through engaging with and critiquing Kwame Anthony Appiah. Because again, what happens to the level of nation state is that recognition is always individualized.

17:53 PO: Yes.

17:55 PW: But it's also, interestingly enough, tied to identity or a claim to identity. At the same time, it wants to disavow it. So if you go back to the example that I gave of an individual Sikh person wanting to join the RCMP and wear a turban, you can bring a Charter challenge based on that as an individual that might benefit others after.

18:15 PO: Yes.

18:16 PW: But the only way you can make that Charter challenge is one, as an individual, two, to claim identity as a Sikh, and so on, and so forth. And it's true that then that the courts, the legislative nature of the nation state, the courts and legislation, the juridical and the legislation, makes that a possibility. So what recognition often does at the level of the state is actually to reproduce state

power. The state becomes the arbiter...

18:45 PO: Of court, yeah.

18:45 PW: Of what citizens can say. It's important and right and necessary for them. And so in a whole series of official multiculturalism, Charter challenges, all of these... What people call in the US constitutional challenges. All help to reproduce the state as the arbiter of what life should look like. So the state actually holds all of our rights.

19:12 PO: So recognition can become this type of example and reinforce state power, but maybe sometimes it can also become a platform for disruption?

19:20 PW: Mm-hmm. So that's why I call the particular essay, The End of Diversity, because I think it's exactly at those moments that we begin to see how inclusion is about the reproduction of the status quo and not about disruption. Individuals who are included, who get recognition and try to disrupt are often sidelined, often deeply unsuccessful, or often neutered into the institution itself. That you find that the institution is not as elastic and as you might want it to be. That in fact it contracts. And then you become as an individual responsible for why you want to disrupt.

20:08 PW: And so that's one of the ways in which the language of diversity, inclusion and equity keeps institutions going as they are. So we keep saying that if we engage in diversity, if we engage in equity, if we engage in inclusion that we're gonna change the institutions, and yet the institutions look the same... Over 40 years of community multiculturalism and the institutions still look the same.

20:30 PO: Sure. The institutions are incredibly resilient.

20:32 PW: Exactly.

20:32 PO: You write about when those examples or those individuals then fail, what kind of work does that do?

20:39 PW: Well, it often supports the hegemonic view. So either it supports the idea that those communities who were formally excluded are not capable. Are not able to operate at the levels and in sustained ways that the institutions demand, or again, because it is individualized, that particular individual is not capable. And this is the thing about the ways in which those forms of recognition inclusion work, that on the one hand they're deeply individual, on the other hand the individual comes to be reflective of the larger collective.

21:17 PO: Yes.

21:18 PW: Right? So this individual failure is the failure of the larger collective, but individual success is not necessarily the success of the larger collective. [chuckle]

21:26 PO: That's still an aspiration or an...

21:28 PW: Yeah, exactly.

21:28 PO: But the failure always seems to be collective or representative.

21:33 PW: Yes. Yes.

21:34 PO: Your essay argues that the language of diversity sometimes works to obscure who is being included and who's being excluded from social structures like politics. Can you give an example?

21:45 PW: Yeah. So when I wrote that I was thinking largely about the ways in which both the language of diversity and the language of racialization work very particularly right now in Canada in which all non-White people are subject to the possibility of diversity action, and all non-White people are referred to as racialized. But what that doesn't do is it doesn't talk about the different ways in which different non-White people are excluded from institutions, national processes and so on. So Black and indigenous people have very different experiences than let's say, South Asian, than Southeast Asian people, and they have different relationships to this part of the Americas. And so diversity and inclusion can cover over those differences. And so an institution can say that it's a rather diverse institution and not have any Black people.

22:37 PO: Sure.

22:37 PW: Or they can say it's a rather diverse institution and not have any indigenous people. And I was trying to get at that kind of dynamic. What do we mean when we say diversity and who are the persons that would populate a particular place, a university, or a gallery that makes it diverse? And can we call it diverse if there are no Black people? Can we call it diverse if there are no indigenous people? And what are the histories of antagonisms that exists between people who are not White? So that the dynamic is not always about whiteness and blackness, or whiteness and indigenousness. But there are difficulties. There are antagonisms between some Black communities and some South Asian communities. There are antagonisms within... [chuckle]

23:24 PO: Of course.

23:24 PW: South Asian communities between Hindus and Muslims. And so what do we mean when we say diversity? Because it can paper over so many things. It can make so many antagonisms disappear. And so I was trying to suggest those kinds of dynamics.

23:42 PO: And diversity seems to be strategically vague. I don't know what you think, but you're absolutely right. Like what do we mean by diversity? Not entirely clear.

23:49 PW: Yeah. And that's a great way to put it, it's strategically vague.

23:52 PO: Yeah.

23:52 PW: Before I came to the University of Toronto, I was a professor at York University, and in my last years at York University I was the affirmative action director. One of the things that became really apparent to me was exactly that vagueness of diversity, so that at the time people were still struggling with what "people of disabilities," that phrase might mean and how it might be enacted. And I remember sitting in a big faculty meeting with people from all across the faculty, from all across the university, and faculty standing up and saying, "Well, we can't have people of disabilities as a protected category. How will we know if they have a disability unless they're in a chair?" So any cognitive disability or anything of that sort was immediately suspect, right?

24:42 PO: Yeah, yeah.

24:43 PW: And it's exactly that language of diversity that doesn't specifically mark anything that allows institutions to continue as they are while claiming to do the work.

24:55 PO: Yes. Yeah, yeah. And this relates to the concept of racism without race. Can you explain that?

25:00 PW: Well, I think we all now know, we've been all well taught that race is a social construction, but yet, racism continues to exist, yet people continue to differentiate and discriminate on the basis of something called race. So someone look at you and they see you as a White guy, read you as a White guy, someone look at me, read me as a Black guy, and might proceed to engage us differently based on that perception. So while we know that race as a biological entity is fictional, we know that forms of discrimination, forms of disadvantage premised in that logic still exist.

25:36 PW: And so that's what we're trying to get at. And of course, I'm kind of borrowing and adapting from Étienne Balibar, Racism Without Races in which he was trying to get at the ways in which race became transformed into culture, so that we would say that people from this particular kind of culture are not suitable to be in France, and we see that in our contemporary movement. So someone might not say that black people are not welcome in certain parts of the city of Toronto, but they might say, people in baggy pants, they might say, people who wear running shoes, they might say people who wear baseball caps pulled to the side, so these things become pseudonyms for race, but the practice that accompanies it is a practice of racism.

26:21 PO: You also argue that most of the conversations about race function to actually appease white fears. So how can we have a productive conversation about race and racism if as you say "race is a non-starter?"

26:34 PW: I think one of the reasons that we can and cannot is, one is that the activists and thinkers who are most willing to push the conversations the furthest are often the ones the furthest removed from engaging with people who hold power in the important institutions. And then people like myself who are closer to the institutions, the fact that we can be in these institutions means that we've made a bunch of compromises and many, many forms of adaptation. So we use language like diversity, like inclusion...

27:06 PO: Sure, sure.

27:06 PW: Like equity as a way to bring White people along. We come up with terms and phrases that are not as alienating, that are not as difficult to bring White people along. Because we also fundamentally believe that people do change and can change and that when people do change and can change, the institutions change. So there's that part of it, but the other part of it means then that we use a language that often does not get at the difficult heart of the matter, and so, it preempts much deeper, much far-reaching change. And so as much as it might have taken, let's say in the Canadian context after multiculturalism was announced in 1971, it took another maybe decade and a half to move to the language of anti-racism, and then, another decade to move to the language of equity, and then another decade to move to the language of social justice.

28:13 PW: And all of those languages are meant to bring along the institutions in ways that the institutions don't feel so threatened that they're gonna fall apart by including others. And but those are all languages of compromise, they're all languages that are meant to not irritate, if you will, the system too much.

28:36 PO: Sure.

28:36 PW: And part of that has to do with the fact that black and indigenous and many people of color know that one of the functions of racism is deep forms of violence, not just economic violence, but actual physical violence. So there's a part of our activism that's also, if you will, shrouded in fear, fear that violence could break out at any time. And we know this from the US context but we know this from other forms of antagonisms around the world that violence is always a possible response to the demand for change.

29:19 PO: And with this kind of, this historical and contemporary fear of violence, how are groups able to become successful or could become successful in transforming institutions?

29:29 PW: Well, I think one of the ways that they become successful is that on the one hand, you've got the possibility of a certain kind of violence. On the other hand, there's another possibility, the cleansing violence of resistance that Frantz Fanon wrote about in 'Black Skin, White Mask,' and so it's easier to adapt to the language of equity and include some people than to have the forces of the cleansing violence of decolonization come your way. [chuckle]

30:00 PO: Sure, yeah, yeah, yeah.

30:01 PW: And so there's, institutions that want to live are really adaptable to incorporating into the moments or actions that will prolong their life.

30:15 PO: Your essay ends on a very positive note, at least, that's how it appears to me. And you write that "that you hold on to the promise of a decolonial future." How do you envision this future?

30:28 PW: I think for me, the hopefulness is in the fact that one, I believe that everything that we do in practice right now is top and therefore it can be on top. And then I follow this other thinker

Sylvia Wynter, who has taught us very much that the last 500 years of human life has been invented and it was invented after what she calls the superstitious religio epoch of Europe, and we are in the moment of a secularization, and so she's taught me that we can reinvent the world anew. So what that means then for me is that I remain hopeful, I remain committed to the idea that the kinds of ways that we've been taught to imagine difference among us can be retaught, and that, what we now see as the problem of difference does not always have to be the problem.

31:27 PW: But that then requires, when I think about this notion of reinvention, I mean that really involves reinventing how we live together, how we understand what it means to manage our lives collectively and individually, and so that means everything from economy to culture, to religion, and so on.

31:49 PO: And as your role as a professor, how do you see yourself contributing to that?

31:52 PW: I teach from exactly this place, so all of my teaching, it's grounded in this kind of philosophical belief that the coloniality of time and being can be reinvented and that part of my pedagogy is to engage my students and my students to engage me in what that reinvention might look like. So I see my classroom as a tiny little space of experimentation, where we engage in the project of questioning and reinvention.

32:22 PO: That's great, thank you so much.

32:23 PW: Thank you.

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32:30 IR: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neill in conversation with Professor Rinaldo Walcott from the University of Toronto. On our next episode, we'll talk to Professor Tanya Lee about how getting a proper job no longer means what it used to. Please subscribe on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite app, so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by the Centre For Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Ianeke Romero, thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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