

Lydia Plath, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 22 September 2025

Lydia Plath is Professor of History at the University of Warwick. Her scholarly specialisms are in interdisciplinary nineteenth-century American and British histories, and British histories and American studies pedagogies. She is the author of the chapter 'Decolonizing History' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *So, a scene setting question to start with. When, where and what did you study at university?*

Lydia Plath (LP): So I studied history at the University of Warwick as an undergraduate from 2002 to 2005. And I also spent my second year on a year abroad at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

TL: *Did you want to do the year abroad from the start?*

LP: Yes, one of the reasons I chose Warwick was because you could do that integrated year abroad, because I knew I was going to want to do some kind of further study. I wanted to not do a four-year undergraduate degree, I wanted to get on with it. So, that was always the plan, to study in the US as part of the degree.

TL: *How did you find that experience?*

LP: Oh, it was amazing. Yeah. I cannot sell the benefits of a year abroad enough. I'm conscious that the world is very different now. I don't really want to go to the US at the moment, I'm not sure I'd tell students to. But just the experience of being in a different place was fabulous. And it's what got me interested in the kind of history that I do now, being able to study Black history and African American

This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

history and various other things. And, I mean, I lived in Southern California for a year, did a lot of surfing, it was great.

TL: *Were there opportunities to do Black history or African American history on your degree scheme in the UK?*

LP: Yeah, there were, and I did in my final year. When I came back I did a special subject on slavery in the American South. So there were some, but not nearly to the extent that I experienced in California. And I also did quite a lot of non-history subjects there. I did some psychology, I did stuff that was coded as women's studies, stuff that's coded as Black studies. So it was a much more interdisciplinary approach than you could do in the UK then, certainly as a history student. I think now our students have a lot more flexibility to do outside options and there's lots more available to them. But back when I did my undergraduate, it was a very rigid set of core modules and things that you had to do.

TL: *Quite a few of the people I've been talking to have said that they initially either started doing a different degree topic or that they did a joint degree. And there seems to be a theme emerging that historians quite like drawing from different disciplines. So it's interesting that although you started out with a history degree, you feel like you benefited from having all of those other influences.*

LP: Yeah, that's definitely right. There just wasn't, there wasn't any space in my degree programme. I think technically you could do an outside option, but it was really complicated. So the year abroad was an option to do all sorts of different things. And also, because California is on the quarter system, so it's not semesters, it's quarters, I had to do nine modules, as opposed to the four I would have done at Warwick. So even that just gave me the option to do lots of different stuff because I had to fill up my timetable. Even just the quantity of choice was really different to what we have in the UK, I think.

TL: *In terms of the non-history modules you took, is there anything that you think still influences you as a historian today? A different approach or anything like that?*

LP: That's a good question. What did I take? Probably the most impactful on me as a human, and therefore as a historian secondary to that, is a couple of modules with a professor called James H. Cones III, who was a psychotherapist, and we did a whole bunch of stuff around trauma, around psychology and trauma and racism and violence, and how people physically respond and psychologically respond to those kinds of things. That's really impacted the kind of work that I do, as I then went and did a PhD that was about slavery and violence, and also the anti-racist work that I do. It gave me a bit of a grounding and an interest in understanding how racism affects people, not just structurally, but

also individually. So it has fed into me as a historian, but more in that thinking about racial and social justice, which is really what I got out of my time in California. I'm a white woman from rural Worcestershire. These were not things that were on my radar before I went to California and experienced that different environment. So that's really shaped what I care about and who I am, and probably why I ended up being a historian rather than going off and doing something else. Those are probably all interconnected for me.

TL: *And over the course of your degree, what was your favourite module and why?*

LP: Favourite module over my entire degree? That's a hard question. Probably my favourite module I took was the one, it was an African American history module at UCLA. I can't remember the title of it, it was taught by a young Black professor, Dr Scot Brown, and you don't get many young Black history professors in the UK. So that was a different experience as well. But he used a lot of music to teach Black history, and that was just really engaging. Those are some of the most engaging discussions I had as an undergraduate. But then also probably the real answer is my special subject at Warwick, which was on slavery in the American South. That module was worth half the credits in my final year (as it included my dissertation), which meant that you had real opportunity to go into so much depth and primary sources and really get into all the kind of detail. I think now degree structures don't really allow for that. But it was really valuable to do that kind of really deep primary source work. So those two modules together if I can have two favourites.

TL: *A really engaging tutor, different ways of teaching like using like music, really getting to grips with primary sources – lots of elements combined there. Did you take any skills, historiography or theory modules at any point?*

LP: Yes. When I was an undergraduate, we had a historiography module in the third year. And it was just called 'Historiography', I think. I remember it being really hard. And there was skills stuff built into a first-year module called 'Making of the Modern World'. We still have 'Making of the Modern World', and it still has skills stuff built in. It's the same. But 'Historiography' was probably the main one. And I, as an undergraduate who did not know better being at Warwick, skipped the week on E.P. Thompson and then had no idea what was happening the rest of the year. My tutor, the late, great Roger Magraw, was so much a Thompsonian that all the seminars ended up being about E.P. Thompson in some way or another. But I really struggled.

So that's my tip. Don't skip the week on the most prominent historian from your department!

TL: *That is a really good tip [laughs]. But third year seems like a very late point to introduce historiography.*

LP: Yeah. So actually, now we've moved it into year two and we're designing its new iteration, which is coming in this year. But I think then it was in year three because it was an acknowledgement that it was really hard, it was very theoretical. We moved into year two because the feedback we had from students was that once you've learned it in year three, it's too late, unless you're going on to a Masters, to apply it. And that was definitely how I felt about it. I remember they had a roundtable right at the end when historians from the department or who'd been teaching on the module talked about how they interpreted historiography and how they used it. And they're like, if you could follow this conversation, then you've got it, you understand. And I remember thinking, like, yeah, but I'm about to graduate. Might have been nicer to understand this slightly earlier. But then I did a Masters, so it did come in handy.

TL: *What kinds of things are you thinking about now as you're redesigning the second year version of that module?*

LP: So, maybe if I explain the iteration. It moved from year three to year two, and in the process of moving it, we changed it from one big module into two smaller modules. One was history of history, and then one was meant to be contemporary approaches, contemporary meaning post-1990s. At the same time, we introduced a module called 'The Research Project', which was a pre-dissertation, how to do research module. And the feedback we had from students was that the contemporary approaches to history and the research project modules seemed really similar, and some of the assessments were really similar. So now we're squishing those three modules back into one big one that we're calling 'Historical Research'.

The first term is mostly post-1960s approaches to the history of history, you know, E.P. Thompson onwards basically. And then term two is going to be much more skills and practice-focused. So, you know, what is a primary source, how to use them and how to interpret them. I'm doing that week, for example, with my early modernist colleague, and we're going to talk about how early modernists and modernists think about these things differently, because that's a part where students get really confused. So that's about to run in its new iteration, which I think will be an improvement. I don't think there's ever such a thing as a perfect module that does everything that everyone wants it to do. But we're trying to get that balance between the intellectual side of things, like how much Foucault do students really need to know, versus the skills part. But we've really changed the assessment, so instead of just writing an essay, as they would have used to have done about, you know, 'Tell me about what Foucault thought about history',

or whatever it might be, their first assignment is now to reflect on their own position and their own viewpoint, and how that links into how other historians have thought about things. So, you know, they might think, well, I'm a woman, so I'm coming at this from a feminist angle, and that kind of thing. And that is going to lead into a research proposal, which leads into a research project. So we're less interested, I guess, in testing their knowledge about all the historians who have come before and what was a really big, important school of thought in the 1970s, and more into how that affects how they might go and do research now. And then other colleagues are going to teach the kind of hardcore intellectual history stuff as an option for the students who want it, rather than giving it to everybody. Because a lot of students just don't care, don't see how it's relevant, and I don't blame them.

TL: *I think these things always are much easier to grasp if there's a practical application in some way. Moving on, I wanted to ask some questions around the topic of your chapter in A Practical Guide, which is on decolonizing history. Could you say a little bit about what the project of decolonizing history is, and why it's important?*

LP: The project of decolonizing history is, I think, most fundamentally about requiring all of us to think about who we are and what kind of history we do and where that has come from. It is framed as decolonizing because it comes out of this movement to think about, in the UK context, the British empire and how the British empire created history as a discipline, but also how universities were complicit in empire, and the impact that's had both on people who were formerly colonized in the British empire, but also those of us in Britain in the metropole, and how we think about history. So in some senses, it's what we should all be doing all the time, just remembering that we are part of a historical process and thinking about where we are coming from and why we are learning the things we're learning. For example, in a historical research module, who are the ten or so historians we think you really all have to know about? In most universities, they are all white men based in Britain or the United States. Just understanding how we've got to that point is important. It doesn't mean they're not important. We probably should all know who Foucault and E.P. Thompson and whoever are, but we should also understand that that construction comes from somewhere, it's not just naturally occurring. At Warwick, our tagline for all of our prospectuses and admissions and stuff is 'question everything'. For me, decolonizing is about that. It's about just questioning, OK, well, what is history? Who determines what's worth studying? Who determines who gets to do the studying? What are the structures in which we do that? Who has decided that a journal article or an essay is the best way to communicate history? Because that kind of

writing is also a particularly Western concept. All of these things fit into decolonizing in its broadest sense.

TL: *So it's essentially about questioning both accepted ways of doing things and analysing the power structures that underlie that?*

LP: Yeah, exactly. All of that is related to power and who has it and who hasn't, and how we've reached the point that we've got to, and how that fits into big world systems like empire, like capitalism, like slavery. Those have all had an impact on the discipline of history and how it's created, and we should be thinking critically about that.

TL: *You've also done quite a lot of work on anti-racist pedagogy. Could you say a bit about how that came about?*

LP: So that does go back to some of that work I did at UCLA a long time ago. But I think I became interested in it particularly around the time of Black Lives Matter emerging as a force in the US, which was far earlier than it appeared in Britain in a mainstream way. In 2012, Black Lives Matter as an organization was founded. I'm a US historian by training, and it was something I was turning towards anyway, but the movement really forced the question of how history is not just about the past. It's about what we're doing now and about social justice now. What are we all doing to support that? And there's a particular issue in British academia of there's lots of white people like me trained in Black history. And again, it goes back to that point about decolonizing. We need to think critically about that. How has it ended up that Black history is predominantly taught by white people in British universities? And if we are going to teach Black history, how can we do that in a way that is not purely about history, but is also about taking action now? I was working with a really great colleague, Meleisa Ono-George, who's now at Oxford, who was really at the forefront in making some of these arguments when I came back to Warwick in 2017. Working with her and hearing her talk about these things really influenced me as well. So it's been a meandering path, but it is becoming increasingly important. I've got involved at university level in anti-racist work generally and trying to find my way through that. Because, again, you don't want only white people doing that work, but it's also about white people stepping up to do some of that work, not just leave that to people of colour to work on, because that is also what happens. We need to be really careful about that.

TL: *It's a huge burden, isn't it, if you're somebody who's having to deal with the effects of systemic kind of marginalization and oppression, and then you also have to take on all the labour of fixing it.*

LP: Exactly. You know, we run these workshops for staff together and it's really interesting what my colleagues of colour can say and do in those sessions and what I can say and do in those sessions and trying to reach different audiences. The messenger is actually really

important in doing this work, which is something that we didn't anticipate when we first started it, but has become really crucial to what we do, making sure we always have both a white person and a person of colour leading a session so that we can say the same thing, but people hear it really differently.

TL: *That kind of leads onto the next question. Your doctoral research was on white men in the US South. When people think about the history of race, there's still this assumption a lot of the time that race means Black or it means Asian, and whiteness is not examined. So could you talk a bit about positioning whiteness as something to be studied, and how students engage with that as well?*

LP: That's why it became my PhD research, because no one was really talking about that at the time. Obviously, they are now, and not because of my research, but I was kind of part of a wave. In the US there's been this movement to critical whiteness studies, which has come directly out of critical race theory in the 1990s and onwards. So it's got a long history in the US context, more so than it does in Britain. I teach at the moment a final-year module which is called 'Whiteness: An American History'. And it takes almost the American survey history course and looks at it through specifically the lens of how whiteness is structured. And students respond really well to it. In a couple of the first iterations of the module, I did slip a little bit into just lots and lots of instances of white violence towards people of colour. So like Klan 1, Klan 2, Klan 3. Which is a lot of the history, but it's a bit bleak. So trying to balance it, always keeping whiteness at the forefront of it, really whiteness's impact on people of colour, that we don't study white people just because they're interesting, but because this has a really important impact. I've been trying to get that balance. And one of the assignments that students do on that module is a group project where they have to do some kind of anti-racist work and think about who their audience is, and they make board games and podcasts and school curricula and all sorts of different things to try and communicate the importance of understanding that whiteness is not a neutral category, that it is also a category of power and often of violence, historically. It forces those critical questions of things that students often take for granted, and we all take for granted, about why things happen in the way that they do, and particularly is about who gets to be white and where that line is. That's always a really interesting set of sessions we have about immigration in the US context and how Irish people are treated and Italian people are treated. There's a really interesting set of court cases in the early 1920s where a Japanese immigrant and Indian Sikh immigrant both claim whiteness in different ways. And it's actually the same judge who reverses his opinion of what whiteness is within a couple of months to exclude the other one. So

students come in thinking, OK, I know what whiteness is. And if by the end of the module they really have no way of describing what whiteness is, they've got it, because it's actually so amorphous and so ever-changing, that's the point. That's what I wanted them to take away, is that actually there's no way of pinning down what whiteness is and therefore no way of pinning down what any other race is either. It's not like Blackness is some kind of fixed known entity, whereas whiteness is something more complicated. It demonstrates how race just doesn't function like that, and it's always comparative and always about power.

TL: *It sounds brilliant. Doing these interviews makes me want to go back and do another undergraduate degree. But onto the final few questions. How did you end up as a historian?*

LP: It's a good question. So, I wanted to be a lawyer. And my whole plan, it was one of the reasons that I only did a three-year degree with a year abroad, was because I was fully intending to go on and do a law conversion course and become a lawyer. And thinking about the reason I wanted to become a lawyer was because I was really interested in like solving crimes, that's an overstatement, but it was the 1990s, there were all those inspirational films with lawyers as the ones who get to the truth. They're the ones who work out what really happened, in anything by John Grisham, or with Demi Moore in *A Few Good Men*. These were my models of what being a lawyer might entail when I was sixteen. And I think two things happened at university. One was that I realized from various briefings and things that that wasn't what lawyers did at all. What lawyers actually do sounds less interesting than that. But also, that's kind of what historians get to do. We get to discover truth. We get to think about justice. And the kind of history that I still do is working out, yeah, what did happen? Who was to blame? If there's blame involved, which in violent incidents there often is, who? So there's that kind of angle in that actually, I didn't know 'historian' was a profession that would let me do the things I was interested in doing. But then the flip side of it is that I realized, having done a three-year degree, that I was in no way done learning. I still really wanted to keep on learning. So I did a Masters and then I still wanted to keep on learning. So I did a PhD and I still just want to keep on learning. That's the beauty of being a historian is that your knowledge is never fixed. You're never done. You just keep learning new things. And now, I get to learn them alongside incredibly bright undergraduate students who help me learn things as well, which is brilliant. So, you know, it's the job that I didn't know I wanted. I couldn't have imagined how rewarding teaching and continuing learning were going to be. So until I'm done learning, I don't think I want to stop being a historian.

TL: *You might have already covered this with that last answer, but what do you most like about being a historian?*

LP: Teaching is what I like the most. By teaching, I don't mean standing at the front giving lectures. I kind of hate doing that. But I like being in seminars, I like having conversations with students, and I like both enabling students to see things that they didn't know existed, or things that really surprise them, and seeing that learning and seeing that journey. When you see a student in the first year who you then supervise for their dissertation, and you just see how much they've grown, that is so fulfilling. But also, I get to learn so much from my students. Most of my research projects have come out of questions students have asked me, and I'm like, 'Oh, I don't know. Interesting. Let me go find that out', and then it becomes a chapter. So yeah, teaching is the best part, working with students.

TL: *It's a lovely way of thinking about history as a collaborative discipline, because so many people still think of it as kind of lone scholar, but actually there are all these interactions that raise questions.*

LP: Yeah, and actually all the work I've done has been collaborative. I'm much more interested in publishing in edited collections, or special issues, or going to conferences to talk to other people, not just to present my research and get some feedback and leave again but trying to be part of a community of people all trying to do something meaningful. If that's not too corny.

TL: *I also wanted to ask, are there particular primary sources that you use in your research or for teaching that you find are particularly interesting, something that students may not have come across before?*

LP: In my research at the moment, I'm using a lot of newspapers. That project is actually about British history rather than US history, and it has nothing to do with race either, so it's kind of a bit of a sideline. I'm trying to find out about this set of completely ordinary people who grew up in the same town that I grew up in, in the nineteenth century. And I hadn't quite anticipated how rich the local newspapers were going to be, sometimes for the specific individuals, but sometimes just for getting a sense of what's going on, like who stole some apples from who, and who knocked the hat off a policeman's head, and all this stuff that's going on, in this small rural town. So definitely newspapers. I think there's so much you can do with those, and one of the things I do for a different module, we use a lot of online databases, and try to tease out stories of people in the past, and newspapers are really good for that. Other than that, I like letters. Letters are a nice source, particularly letters that were intended to be private, that are now in an archive, and about political things. So there's this great letter that I use with my final-year

students, between two members of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], this civil rights organization in the early twentieth century. It's during the era of women's suffrage. And these two Black organizers are just snarking about the white women whom they're encountering, just taking the mick out of them, and it's just really funny, those kinds of quite human interchanges. Obviously, there's the direct quote that's the important bit about what they're saying about the organizing they're doing, but actually, the second half of the letter is just they really don't like Alice Paul, and they're having a bit of a go at her, and sharing their interactions about her, and all the ways she's been racist to them that week. It's just something that gets to that humanity, I suppose.

TL: *And that kind of thing is also really important for having that sense of how any kind of organization actually works in practice, isn't it?*

LP: Yeah, because that's all the stuff that now, that doesn't get minuted, right? That would never be in formal minutes of an organization, but in these letters, you can see those other conversations that are going on.

TL: *Just a final couple of questions. So, what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

LP: If I can have two, then on the downside, I think there's a huge amount more pressure on students than there was when I was an undergraduate. They're paying so much money for this degree, and I think students really feel that pressure. Warwick students are stressed about internships, about doing really well, about what comes next, and that employment prospects stuff is so pressurizing. I just didn't experience that, and partly that's because of my privilege, but also because that wasn't the conversation that was in departments then. I think there was just an assumption that if you go on to work, you'll get a good job, so you don't even have to worry about it. Whereas now, that has changed. But what there also is, on the much more positive side, on student experience, is so many more opportunities, I think, than there were when I was a student, about things you can get involved in alongside your degree. There are more interesting modules, there's far more choice of modules at my university now than there used to be. Different kinds of things, different kinds of assessment, different societies and groups and clubs and just so much going on. It's a bit overwhelming. There's so much going on. But if students can navigate their way through all those opportunities and find the things they really care about, find the groups of people who are interested in the same things as them, then you can have probably a much more intellectually rich experience of university than perhaps I did. I wasn't a particularly serious undergraduate. I didn't go to that many lectures. I did go to my seminars. I wasn't that into it until I kind of came back in my final

year and was like, no, this is actually what I want to do. So, it's about making the most of all the stuff that's on offer.

TL: *And this might overlap as well with the last question. So, what is your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

LP: Read your emails [both laugh]. Seriously, read your emails, because that's where you find out what's going on. The number of students who say, oh, I would have loved to do that, but I didn't know about it, and I say, we sent you four or five emails telling you about this. Read your emails, keep an eye on all the options that are out there. There's so much going on. Try to get engaged with things as early as possible.

Obviously, there'll be lots of stuff you're not interested in, filter all that out, but if you can find the things you are interested in and try and get engaged. And get engaged in the department as well. History departments are so keen to hear from students about how things are going, how we can do better, what students would like to see, you know, and we want to try and implement that where possible. So, just tell us what's going on. And also, use office hours. Come and talk to us. I have so many students who are like, 'I know it's your office hour, can I ... am I bothering you?' And I'm like, 'It is literally my job to talk to you. Come and see me'. So, come and ask us questions. Engage is the overall message, I suppose.

TL: *That's a really nice overall tip to end on.*