

On Whiteness: A Conversation between Julian Walker and Rob Lewis

Robert Lewis and Julian Walker

Julian is a white woman and an anti-racism writer and facilitator (who designed and delivered the Museums Association programme with Cheryl Garvey). Rob Lewis is Director of Transformation at Birmingham Museums Trust, a white man and participant on the Museums Association pilot Anti-Racist Museums Programme in 2024. This conversation offers a personal reflection on the process of coming to understand whiteness for both Rob and Julian. The conversation took place following the conclusion of the Anti-Racist programme, and from within the construct of white experience.

Perspectives from Our Early Careers

Rob

The first 20 years of my career was in collection roles in museums. Trained in conservation in archaeology and then museums, my world was “down a microscope” and race never came under it. I was aware of gender, aware that I worked in a white profession and sector, and aware that it was accessible by a narrow academic route. The turning point was when I moved into a formal leadership role, moving from stuff to people. Even in this role, one that was new to the organisation and uncommon in museums, I was in a mindset where it was business processes, structures, ways of doing things. It is through the Anti-Racist programme, which was a pilot programme developed by the Museums Association to collaborate with a cohort of museums that are actively working toward becoming anti-racist, where I started thinking more broadly. I was looking at the strategy we were writing and realised there was no EDI [equity, diversity and inclusion] component in this strategy. My inner voice went “oh” in realisation.

Julian

I echo that. Robin DiAngelo speaks about being a putative adult and it never having been any part of her personal development or academic work, formal or informal human education, to develop race competence (2018). I was absolutely the same. The first time I started to get to grips with my whiteness was when I was working at Barnardo's, as the director responsible for the Race Equality and Diversity strategy. Before then, it never clicked that race equality and diversity were anything to do with me, other than as a benevolent bystander. I found that fascinating at a charity where racism and anti-racism was a massive issue.

At Barnardo's we put together a management development programme aimed at Black and Brown staff; years later, most of the people that benefited did so by getting a job elsewhere. We weren't training people up and promoting them internally. We needed to look at how whiteness – as a default, and thus a position of power (Dyer 1997) – was operating in the organisation. Before then at the Home Office I was a senior civil servant at the time when Jack Straw ordered the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence: racism has always been a massive part of the criminal justice system. I had this academic understanding of racialized disparities but no understanding that it was anything to do with me, nor [was there any] expectation from my employers that I should develop that understanding.

Evolving Perspectives

Rob

I did the Clore Fellowship a few years ago – a well-regarded and self-directed programme for exceptional leaders in the cultural sector. I faced this reality that institutions are not always a good thing. Their colonial identity, their hogging of resources, and how they look and act: all of which is quite disenfranchising to those outside, and the translation of that to who comes through the door. This was a diverse cohort of peers who could tell me “your experiences are very different than ours”. Until then I’d ambled along quite happily because I’ve been able to amble along quite happily. I worked in a sector as a white man, able to sound quite middle class, present as straight, so able to pass within this system set up for people who look and sound like me. That experience enabled me to step into the kind of transformation that I wanted to channel my energy into: changing the systems and structures that we work in, still driven by a love of collections but using those resources differently. It was a reconnection with why I was doing what I was doing, and a need to create change in a more meaningful and fundamental way.

Julian

I’m connecting with how you’re describing growing into this activist place. I came from a white, upper middle-class background. I joined the civil service because I believed in public service. It was only much later in my career that I developed this real activist stance, prompted by relationships, particularly with Black women. The first conscious learning I did specifically about whiteness was due to the intervention of a woman of colour in my team at Barnardo’s, who gave me Peggy McIntosh’s ‘White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack’ (1989) essay. I remember taking it home and sharing it with a Black friend and asking him: “which of these feels most figural for you?”. He looked at it and said every single one.

My learning about race and whiteness keeps presenting more asymmetries. As a white human being, I get all the benefits and hardly any of the pain. I get to feel good about making a choice as a white person to do the work of anti-racism. So many of my Black friends and colleagues speak about doing this since they were children, to survive and keep their psyche and agency intact in a world that violently opposed them. As a white kid, I’m given nurturing, encouragement, and then the choice as an adult to step into something that enables me to feel good about myself rather than it being a necessity for my survival in a world that in James Baldwin’s (1961) words “had prepared no place for you”.

Rob

You referred quite naturally to having Black friends and colleagues. I grew up in a small, very white town in South Wales. I went to university twice, neither time was significantly more diverse. I moved to Scotland and I lived in a white world. It was when I moved to Qatar and I saw this status being given to white people in a country where they weren’t the majority that something started to jar in my mind. When you and Cheryl [Garvey] introduced this concept of whiteness in the Anti-Racist programme,¹ something clicked around consciously understanding that sense of never having to challenge who you are – the privilege that you were born into the world and how you move around the world. And how you don’t have to fight for your place or create it because you have this state of being that doesn’t require you to deal with being challenged by society about who you are.

Julian

This is about power. In the same way that globally women are a numerical majority over men, yet there is nowhere in the world that patriarchy is not operating. It’s not about numbers, it’s about power. And we as white people, really need to let go of thinking our privilege is about majority status. I’ve worked quite a lot across West, East and North Africa. My British passport and being an ex-UK civil servant – and white – was a massive privilege because in all these

former colonies who have a UK style of government, I could walk in and have that cachet; I made my client look good when they could roll in a white advisor.

The Role of Museums

Rob

Decades since the collapse of the British Empire, and that mentality is still there. I find museums fascinating for this because museums are, fundamentally, products of the Enlightenment and the physical embodiment of Empire. While constantly repurposing themselves and redefining what they are, fundamentally the core of museums is enmeshed with this expression of Empire. In particular I think of how museums are internally and I keep coming back to Einstein's definition of madness. We keep doing the same thing and expecting something different to happen. We keep the operation of museums the same way, we structure museums the same way, and keep being surprised that we are not seeing a more diverse population coming through our door.

Julian

What you say about museums being the embodiment of colonial enterprise resonates with me. It's not only acquiring precious and beautiful things, but then the kind of self-righteousness of "we're doing this because we're entitled to". It goes deeper than that because it's about the way that knowledge and meaning are made; knowledge only exists once it has been approved by a white person or put in a journal with some footnotes.

I recall the example that Tara Munroe (Leicester City Council 2023) gave us [on the Anti-Racist programme] from work in Leicester around objects whose function the museum was unsure of, or had mislabelled, and going to local communities and the elders in local communities, who could say exactly what they were.² Whiteness says, "we know what this is, and knowledge doesn't exist unless I've said so". And we are so often wrong.

I read about a female archaeologist [Gertrude Caton-Thompson] working in the 1920s in Great Zimbabwe. She had to fight to have it accepted within archaeology that this was an indigenous African creation (Ndoro 2005). European explorers repeatedly misattributed the construction, for example to Phoenician or Israelite or Arab civilisations. It was inconceivable to them that Black Africans could have created these complex structures at the time when the Europeans were grappling around in the mud with the Black Death.

Rob

This is where I start to get angry and emotional, and that's interesting because you used the word activist earlier and I recoiled: it's not how I think of myself. And then when introducing some of these themes I get into that activist mindset.

I want to connect back to where we started, with race competence. Museums are hierarchical, with a clear segregation and division of labour. You are a conservator, you do that. You are a curator, you do that. Or you do engagement, and so on. But it means that in those roles such as collections care, which is around how we categorize, how we define, use, store, or care for collections, we make choices about how we invest the resources to do that. Are we putting all our resources into the so-called "fine art" rather than say collections from the Global South? Whiteness is permeating through it. And we layer it on top of it. We may look disdainfully at decisions that our predecessors made in for example, 1885, when Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery was founded, but we never revisit that. We live with it and say, "well, that's part of the history of the object" as if somehow the "museumness" supersedes the object itself, as if the museum has become more important than the object. And there is this self-reinforcing myth that turns us into these cathedrals of self-importance, and does not challenge on a fundamental level, that there is all this stuff that's buried deep within the history of how the museum operates.

Because of that hierarchical division of labour that museums, like many institutions, are good at, EDI work, if it's there, sits in a certain role in a certain disconnected department.

And I could get away with thinking “Great, that person is doing that; I’ll get on with my work with the collections”. It perpetuates this, if not tokenistic, certainly silo-type approach.

And then the gatekeeping mentality of choosing what we display and what and how we interpret. There’s co-curating or collaborating on interpretation but how systematically? How much power are we still holding? That becomes a lot more radical than the frolicking around the edges. We recognize the problem but either don’t know how to grapple with it, or the problem is too big. This slightly “virtue-signalling” way – and why I keep coming back to this – it’s because it’s not across the museum as whole. And so nothing meaningfully changes because we are not changing how the system works.

Towards Reparative Justice

Julian

It is not just museums. I think across the piece it is another one of these self-serving, soothing myths that white liberals give ourselves, that those people back in the past were like, so racist, so awful, so colonizing and we are better now. But we are still enjoying all the goodies that those terrible racists in the past have bequeathed to us. Like you say, yes, we do a bit of virtue signalling now, but we are not really getting to grips with “what does it mean”. Because how can we get to grips with what it means without being serious about reparative justice? On a moral, emotional level, [it means] recognizing the psychic benefits that I get from being white. It’s money, power, and wealth, but that’s only part of it, and I don’t think many of us are willing to face up to what am I going to need to give up for justice to prevail? Money? Wealth? My sense of myself comfortably at the top? My sense of myself as a good person? What do I need to give up? Are you prepared to give up the wages of whiteness (Du Bois [1935] 1962) to bring justice? But I am also dehumanized by racism. Although I benefit from it in material and psychological ways, it is dehumanizing to have power and privilege that I haven’t earned. It’s dehumanizing in my relationships with Black colleagues and friends, to constantly be up against this asymmetry through which we are both acculturated into roles where she serves me, and I wait for her to give me comfort. That is dehumanizing for me as well as for her.

Rob

I recognize that I’m not there yet. Where we are on our respective journeys. That is why you are the facilitator, and I’m the student on the Anti-Racist programme, but it feels relevant that I’m in this conversation. I don’t think that long ago it would have been unusual for a white man who’s made his career in collections to be talking about issues like this because it will be a Black or Brown person who’s leading EDI. There is an importance in that the people who were in the Anti-Racist programme cut across the museum.

There are some fundamentals that aren’t just in place yet. But I’m catching myself saying that because we have a habit of letting ourselves off the hook and saying, “oh, this is complex”. We can’t get to that point because we turn and say “but we don’t even have disabled toilets yet”, as if the inability to tackle one barrier excuses us from tackling any others. Do I agree with myself there? Or is that the party line of “we can’t do this”, and we should be aiming for something more. Maybe the conversation should be around reparative justice rather than diversifying our volunteer cohort. It needs to be a bigger ambition.

The Activist Mindset

Julian

I notice how you de-skilled and disempowered yourself by putting yourself as a student and me as a teacher. There is a lot of power that you have got and are ready to wield in your activist self. But if we don’t step up, things are not going to shift. It’s not right, but you and I will be listened to and thought to be objective: “oh, if a white person is saying racism is here, maybe that’s true”. Whereas if a Black person says it: “she would say that, wouldn’t she?”.

Rob

This makes me think of another concept you introduced in the Anti-Racist programme – this distinction Emma Dabiri makes between allyship or coalition (Dabiri 2021). I came into the programme feeling, perhaps like many of us do, that I understood allyship, but appreciate now, through the programme, the meaning of coalition. Similarly, one of the sessions surfaced the idea of not asking permission to step into the space and just doing this work. And I could recall a week or so before that, going to one of my colleagues about work that we're doing around EDI, and using the words "do you mind if I do some work around this?". At the time I felt like I was being polite. The sense that I had to seek their permission.

I spent quite a lot of time treading water and this internal transformation for me has accelerated the last couple of years thanks to Clore. Collections and objects were so important to my life and where I came from. They were something I connect with, and that is so important to us as people in terms of storytelling and connections. The potential of museums to be places that improve the social good [is a huge appeal], and I feel like museums as organisations, as institutions, can change.

Julian

My last job inside an organisation was at Barnardo's, and I have spoken about the ways in which I learnt personally from that. But I failed to bring about meaningful change organisationally. I do believe that people can change, given my experience as an addict in recovery in a 12-step programme; I know that radical personal transformation is possible. And I feel I can speak to that with a degree of authenticity and honesty that I do not experience myself around [through consulting on] organisational change. How does that connect with my whiteness? I think one of the things that whiteness enables us to do is to be very glib and in our heads. We don't get involved: "this is messy. This is hard. This involves confronting myself and feeling humiliated, ashamed, angry". All that disgust is something that comes up for me around my whiteness and my learning. And feeling that we don't often get to grips with that, whiteness encourages us to be very cerebral and rewards us for it. And we miss out everything from the neck down. You know, the blood and guts and groin and a heart and all of that. How can you be a human being without connecting with that stuff?

Rob

I love that. After the Anti-Racist programme an e-mail came asking us to meet and update on our anti-racism action plans. I was a bit [of the attitude that] "we're good with plans". I went into the Anti-Racist programme thinking how a couple of years ago we had an EDI plan, and it was very thorough. I looked at it after the programme, and I thought it was so unemotional. This, for me, is about how we do everything that we do and how we are who we are. You can't put that on a bit of paper. But I think what you can show is who you are genuinely and authentically. And that I think that's how I feel. And it feels like that's more meaningful in terms of change, that being in our guts, not on a document.

Julian

I resonate with that, and I believe in my guts and through my scholarship that leaders using themselves is the most powerful thing. It is how you're being; it is how you're showing up that's going to make a bigger change than what's in your plan. So, for me, one of the ways that whiteness can be in service of anti-racism is when we wake up to the fact. Fred Moten (2013) has this quote: 'I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?'

I am more of a human being now because of my anti-racism work. Nothing has made me understand my experience of the world better than anti-racist scholarship, you know, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin – they have shown me myself and revealed a possibility of me deepening my own humanity, because my liberation is dependent on your liberation as a white man who doesn't identify as straight, and it's dependent on the liberation of all

my Black friends and colleagues. None of us is free until all of us are free, and it's taken me a long, long time to really get that in my body, rather than just in my head. To see the ways that, as a woman, I continue to be dehumanized by patriarchy, and that patriarchy is not race neutral. Patriarchy is intimately linked to white supremacy (Dyer 1997). I had to escape its bounds to be able to be in my full humanity. It's taken me a long time to really feel that as a white woman, my liberation is also bound up in anti-racism.

Notes

- ¹ Reference is made here to Cheryl Garvey of Talk Listen Create Ltd, a management consultancy with the mission of growing people and place. Garvey co-designed and co-delivered the Anti-Racist Museums Programme for the Museums Association.
- ² Leicester City Council, 'Exhibition brings to life story of museum's casta paintings', Leicester City Council 2023. <https://web.archive.org/web/20250414013946/https://news.leicester.gov.uk/news-articles/2023/september/exhibition-brings-to-life-story-of-museum-s-casta-paintings/>, accessed 4 November 2025

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