

White Thinking: Diversity Fails in Scottish Heritage

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Abstract

This article interrogates the Scottish heritage sector's engagement with decolonization and diversity initiatives. It situates these efforts within broader narratives of civic nationalism and progressive exceptionalism, which have seen the active adoption of policy frameworks to support "New Scots". These narratives have been increasingly challenged by public recognition of Scotland's historic involvement with slavery, empire, and colonization. Drawing on interconnected case studies from across several publicly funded projects, the article critiques tokenistic diversity measures that fail to dismantle systemic whiteness and argues that meaningful decolonial work requires sustained organizational change rather than "piecemeal interventions". Conceptualized as "diversity fails", the article finds value in small-scale coalition approaches to anti-racist heritage work against the backdrop of repetition, inertia and resistance in broader and more systemic approaches to change.

Introduction

Over recent years, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and racist discourse has flourished within the UK, spread both by online warriors and politicians (sometimes one and the same). It has, on occasion, been accompanied by violent acts, not least the riots of summer 2024, which targeted asylum seekers and longstanding minority communities. From a Scottish perspective, such racism is often seen – whether by politicians, policy makers or the media – as a distinctly English problem. Recalling the murder of Axmed Sheekh by racists in Edinburgh in 1989, the prominent journalist and academic Gary Younge (a student in Edinburgh at the time) commented, 'I remember seeing the headline "Has Scotland caught the English disease [of racism]?"'. There was this sense that racism was this English thing, and as Scots were an oppressed group, racism just wouldn't occur to them'.¹ Younge recounted this incident at a public forum on racism in Glasgow in February 2025, the telling title of which was: 'Still "nae problem here"?' Since devolution, Scotland's investment in civic nationalism, and the active adoption of policy frameworks to support "New Scots", had formed part of a narrative of progressive exceptionalism. This has recently been challenged, however, by increasing public awareness of Scotland's substantial historical investment in slavery and empire, alongside high-profile cases of institutional racist violence, not least the death of Sheku Bayoh in police custody in 2015, as well as the spread of anti-immigrant protests (previously seen as an expression of an increasingly far-right English nationalism) to hotels housing asylum seekers at various sites in Scotland in the summer of 2025.

It is within the context of Scotland's often problematic sense of its own exceptional position on race and racism that this article considers how the Scottish heritage sector has responded to allegations that it is complicit within a larger infrastructure for imagining, centring, and privileging the reproduction of whiteness. The article traces key debates about Scottish identity over the past two decades before exploring a number of recent projects within the heritage sector – projects in which one or all of the present authors have participated – that have sought to challenge institutional whiteness within Scottish museums. In particular, it draws

on the findings of EDI in Scottish Heritage (EDISH) – a project which fed into the Scottish Government-commissioned project *Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums* (2022), which was coordinated by Museums Galleries Scotland – and concludes with a small number of connected cases studies from a recently completed project, “White Thinking” and the Failed Promise of Diversity in Scottish Heritage.² In the final sections of this article, our aim is to analyse various “diversity fails” in anti-racism work in Scottish museums by focussing on these case studies. We are interested in how and why systematic approaches to understanding race and whiteness fail to stick in cultural and institutional life. As will be demonstrated below, despite the abundant knowledge and evidence of Scotland’s historic involvement in slavery, empire, and colonisation, there remains a common-sense narrative of national “amnesia” or an “absence” of knowledge. In all of these settings, we are attuned to the failure of diversity initiatives to endure, the failure of community participants to be recognized as knowledge makers (especially the expertise of racially minoritized people beyond the remit of sharing their lived experience), and the failure to be included on equal terms. “Diversity fails” are essentially a demonstration of the successful operation of whiteness.

White Thinking in the Scottish Heritage Sector

In October 2023, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow opened a new, permanent exhibition, *Glasgow, City of Empire*, which constituted the most significant step thus far in an ongoing process of “decolonizing” the museum’s collections. The exhibition explores the city’s connections to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and to empire, as well as devoting space to their ongoing legacies. As part of a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) that focused on overcoming the difficulties involved in embedding decolonial practices within the Scottish museum sector, we organized a collaboration between the Lilian Thuram Foundation for Education against Racism (one of France’s leading anti-racist organizations) and curators at Kelvingrove. Lilian Thuram, who was born on the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe but raised on the outskirts of Paris, is a high-profile figure in France as a very successful former footballer (he won the World Cup in 1998). Since his retirement from football, his foundation has provided anti-racist education in schools and acted as a consultant for various heritage organizations on exhibitions around race, slavery, and empire. We sought to draw on Thuram’s experience in these fields to encourage discussions both within the museum and with external groups, particularly schools (Kelvingrove receives many school tours as Glasgow’s most visited museum, with roughly one million visitors per annum). The overarching aim was to seek to ensure that the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition would be seen as a starting point rather than an end point in the “decolonization” of the museum. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have argued in a landmark article, decolonization is not a metaphor. Rather, it is an ‘unsettling’ process that seeks meaningful change, a process that is not to be confused with the promotion of ‘[c]ultural diversity discourses [which] were understood to inherently challenge the singularity of White cultural experiences; yet at the same time, they typically downplayed the dominance and normativity of White-centric worldviews within institutional structures’ (Bunning 2021: 46).³

Our collaboration on this project with the Lilian Thuram Foundation emerged from David Murphy’s work as one of the English-language translators of Thuram’s *La Pensée blanche* (2020), which was translated as *White Thinking: Behind the Mask of Racial Identity* (2021). As Thuram is at pains to explain in his book, “white thinking” does not act as a descriptor of how or what white people think, but rather as a historically contingent framework that has come to dominate in recent centuries for specific political and economic reasons. Beyond the “good” or “bad” actions of individuals, slavery and empire were driven by the desire for power and profit. For Thuram, “white thinking” is the framework through which the exploitation of the Global South was made to seem “natural”, an expression of innate, white superiority, and museums have been central to perpetuating that belief in these “natural” hierarchies.

We are not suggesting that Thuram’s concept of “white thinking” is somehow unique. Although just a few decades ago there was little popular or academic exploration of the construction of white identity and white supremacy, there is now a seemingly ever-growing body of work on this question. Some of these texts strive for academic objectivity (Painter 2010; Stovall 2021) while others are often scathingly polemical about the ongoing, unspoken hierarchies of race (Andrews 2024; Di Angelo 2019). Similarly, a significant body of work has

been devoted to the exploration of the entrenched coloniality, whiteness, and Eurocentric nature of the heritage sector. In his keynote speech at the *Whose Heritage* conference in 1999, Stuart Hall identified two central challenges for the heritage sector. The first was around democratization, namely, expanding the range of what we recognize as heritage beyond cultural elites to include broader vernaculars of everyday life (e.g. oral history), that is, cultural vernaculars and registers that extend beyond narrow representations of class and race. The second challenge focussed on the de-centring of whiteness in museum spaces, particularly through replacing the universalized perspectives generated in traditional museums (often focussed on linear narratives of progression indexed to racialization) with diverse forms whose epistemological and cultural contexts could not be measured against whiteness. Hall acknowledged that achieving this, however, would raise some difficult questions, such as 'who should control the power to represent?', 'who has the authority to represent the culture of others?'. These questions, he argues, 'have resounded through the museum corridors of the world, provoking a crisis of authority' (Hall 1999: 7).

More recently, Laura Jane Smith has developed the concept of 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD), which represents 'the dominant Western discourse about heritage [...] that works to naturalize a range of assumptions about the nature and meaning of heritage' by privileging expert knowledge, monumentality, and aesthetic values over community perspectives' (Smith 2006: 4). The discourse works to construct a sense of what heritage is and is not, fundamentally challenging assumptions about its inherent value and revealing heritage as a cultural practice used to assert community values rather than preserve objects with self-evident significance (Smith 2006). As Smith has argued, reductive views of heritage rooted through nostalgia have been effectively weaponized in the rise of right-wing populism, where the (white) nation can assume a universal and natural value (Smith 2025). In Scotland, some of the contested debates around whose heritage is being valued, and how, have been diverted by devolution. The imperative to articulate and curate a modern Scottish national identity distinct from that in Britain/England was a form of differentiation that impacted the local experience of anti-racist activism.

Thuram has paid homage to the intellectual traditions that have informed his thinking on whiteness. For example, his collection *My Black Stars*, attempts to broaden public engagement with Black intellectual traditions by bringing together the ideas of important figures such as Sojourner Truth, Frantz Fanon, and Muhammad Ali. While the publishing industry has responded to a growing market for public thinking on decolonial practice, the work underpinning this recent surge is rooted in longer trajectories of Black, postcolonial, and decolonial writing and activism. For example, in relation to the construction of whiteness through heritage discourses, Aimé Césaire's concept of colonial 'thingification' informs how 'white thinking' dehumanizes other experiential frames of reference, while Anibal Quijano's theorization of the 'coloniality of knowledge', and Walter Dignolo's 'decolonial option' framework, provide the epistemological tools for challenging what heritage practitioners now recognize as the "white-washed" narrative that has structured the museum experience.

In Thuram's vision, learning to see these hierarchies for what they are is the first step in moving beyond them. If we learn how this framework operates, then we can understand that whiteness is not some objective norm, and we can begin to look at the world through other frameworks. Our work is part of a wider coordinated effort to move beyond "diversifying" collections and performing "outreach" with marginalized communities. Following the lead of projects such as *Curating Discomfort* at the Hunterian (Churnjeet Mahn, Arunima Bhattacharya, and Nelson Cummings at Kelvingrove Museum were part of the *Curating Discomfort* Community Curators team led by Zandra Yeaman) that have actively sought to dismantle white supremacy in museum spaces,⁴ we worked with Thuram to make visible the mundane and everyday ways in which white thinking structures ideas of cultural value embedded in racialized hierarchies.

Thuram's emphasis on frameworks and perceptions, as well as their relationship to hard economic and political power, spoke to us when envisaging a project to explore how to undo the norm of whiteness in Scottish museums, as did his focus on educational interventions as necessary complements to heritage projects. Many Scottish museums are spaces that were established in the age of empire when whiteness was the unquestioned norm. As the colonial historian Robert Aldrich has argued: 'Empire-building and museum-building went hand in hand' (Aldrich 2010: 13). Both collections and their framing reflected this unquestioned norm but 'the colonial past is no longer a subject that can be avoided or erased' (Aldrich 2010: 27). If curators, educators, and visitors become aware of that framework, can we begin to undo a default whiteness within the Scottish heritage sector? Rather than simply promoting a diversity that increases representation but leaves fundamental structures and

ideas unchallenged, might Thuram's work, and his anti-racist strategies, offer the possibility of more fundamental change?

Essentially, our project argued that white thinking is not a monolith but a protean set of practices which is highly adept at shifting its forms to police the boundaries of whiteness, especially in configuration with the nation state. This is partly why heritage, often funded and recognized by the British state through museums, has become integral to the so-called culture wars and has become integral to how Scottish institutions and policy have accented their own differentiated status.⁵

The threat of public backlash and accounting for the responsible use of public money in the midst of economic precarity or crisis is a risk for museums, especially those run by local authorities. Museums are the mechanism for undergirding heritage with whiteness. This explains why, as Nirmal Puwar (2004) has powerfully analysed, racialized minorities are often perceived as 'space invaders' within structures organized by and through whiteness. While museums may develop policies and practices around diversity and inclusion, they continue to speak from the vantage point of a whiteness that positions "diversity" as a sub-set of its operations. Discussing her own experience of being appointed for "diversity" reasons in another sector dominated by white privilege (universities), Sara Ahmed describes how the promise of diversity is itself a gift delivered by whiteness: 'there we can find ourselves: people of colour being interviewed for jobs "on race" by white panels, speaking to white audiences about our work' (2012: 4). This has become especially true in the museum sector, where racially minoritized workers (regardless of professional expertise) become available as reservoirs of lived experience to inform and authenticate institutional diversity. But as Ahmed further contends, while these roles may allow an institution to demonstrate a flourishing commitment to equality, the result for individuals can be stultifying: 'We can get stuck in institutions by being stuck to a category' (2012: 4), while diversity initiatives fail to "stick".

Scotland, we have a problem

In 2018 a significant edited collection on Scotland and race entitled *No Problem Here: Scotland and Racism* opened with a remarkable statement:

In contrast to England, there has been relatively little public discussion about the historical or contemporaneous structuring power of racism in Scotland. Over many decades, this silence has come to be interpreted as an indication of its absence by much of the Scottish elite, including its political parties, helping to consolidate a now powerful myth that there is "no problem here", that in the memorable Scottish phrase "We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns" [children of god] (Davidson et al. 2018: 9).

While this discussion correctly points to a distinct difference in the history of race and anti-racist activism in Scotland, it is hard to ignore activist engagements with, and scholarly explorations of, race and anti-racism. Recent anti-racist heritage initiatives have included raising awareness of lascars in Glasgow from the mid-nineteenth century, revising the history of Red Clydeside to include the Race Riots of 1919, and fuller accounts of South Asian trade union organizing and activism, particularly from the 1960s. Racialized communities were part of larger coalitions responding to oppression. Nelson Mandela addressed thousands of people in Glasgow's George Square in 1993, twelve years after the city had conferred on him the status of freeman. Left-aligned coalition responses to apartheid, Palestine, and from within the trade union movement were amongst the causes that involved politically active members of racialized communities which have been largely relegated to personal memories. To put it plainly, racism has long been, and remains, a Scottish problem.⁶

The real problem has been the mythologizing of a "welcoming" and "inclusive" Scotland. Perhaps a more productive approach is to ask why discursive forms with cultural and political privilege and legitimacy have failed to engage with the texture and diversity of anti-racist activism in Scotland. Within a popular framework that has categorized Scotland as a "colonized" nation, its role in slavery and empire has often been underestimated, with economic gains primarily attributed to England. However, as Stephen Mullen has argued,

the (re)establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 marked a shift in the response of Scottish historians to the history of Scottish involvement in slavery, colonization, and empire (Mullen and Gibbs 2023). As has been mentioned above, a central problem is Scotland's investment in being viewed as a progressive purveyor of civic nationalism. A nation that finds kin in Scandinavian, socially minded policies, or marginally favours an alignment with Europe, has encouraged a sense of Scotland as a small, progressive nation whose identity has been contrasted with its increasingly inward-looking southern neighbour. From the formal adoption of 'New Scots' (a term derived from a 2001 book by the Glasgow councillor Bashir Maan who used 'New Scots' to refer to the South Asian diaspora in Scotland) by the Scottish Government to develop policy around newer waves of refugees and migrants in Scotland, to the controversy around the Gender Recognition Act from 2022, Scottish politics has attempted to rhetorically differentiate itself from an English political landscape increasingly marked by the rise and influence of right-wing populism:

...[the] narrative of an absent racism in Scottish history has become even more entrenched in the course of recent developments (such as the rise of the SNP and the independence referendum) because it is able to nest so comfortably within the new common sense of Scottish politics, the dominant story that has been forged, by the SNP and others – that the Scots are in some sense different from the English – more egalitarian, more likely to place an emphasis on collectivism over individualism and on government intervention over self-reliance (Davidson et al 2018: 9).

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and as people began to organize their resistance around physical and public symbols of racist power (such as statues), one of Glasgow's most iconic statues found itself at the centre of the debate about Scotland and racism. The statue of the Duke of Wellington has, for several decades, been (near) permanently adorned by an orange and white traffic cone that sits atop the Duke's head (with the occasional addition of a cone for the horse on which he sits). The cone was symbolic of a playful irreverence towards symbols of power (no doubt aided by the shape of the cone). Despite efforts by Glasgow City Council to remove the cones, they always seemed to return, until finally the council embraced the image as a tool for marketing Glasgow as a "fun" destination. In June 2020 a Black Lives Matter (BLM) slogan appeared on the cone. Wellington had been involved in campaigns in Ireland and India and the monument to him sits in front of the former home of the plantation owner William Cunninghame (the building now serves as home to GoMA, the Gallery of Modern Art).⁷ The playfulness embraced by Glasgow City Council was here given a more politically charged meaning. This reminds us that monuments remain in constant dialogue with public space and the publics they live with. As Rahul Rao argues, statues are as much about contemporary debates and anxieties as they are about "conserving" or venerating history.

The BLM intervention on the Wellington statue occurred at the same time as the Green Brigade (a Celtic Football Club supporter group) placed new street signs around Glasgow city centre. A sign for Sheku Bayoh Street appeared under Cochrane Street, named after a tobacco lord (an image of this temporary street sign appears in the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition). The statues and street names that marked Glasgow's city centre became way markers for dialogues on racism and heritage that relied on returning to the past, rather than erasing or removing evidence of its existence, which was the primary fear of groups such as Save Our Statues. Ironically, one of the biggest threats to the city centre's statues came from Rangers Football Club fans after the club's Scottish Premiership victory in 2021. Statues of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were damaged as fans mounted them and draped them with Union Jacks.⁸ Glasgow's city centre became part of an active debate about which histories are valuable, and who really has the power to erase or destroy evidence about the past.

Race and Heritage in Scotland

As the coalition approaches to political blackness lost their traction and policy language around Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) and Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) attempted to take more nuanced approaches to cultural differences and inequalities within racialized communities,

organizations such as the Glasgow Anti-Racist Alliance (GARA) (which would later become the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights) identified a need for a new phase of anti-racist action that could address the emerging discourses of civic nationalism in Scotland. Scotland's first Black History Month ran in 2002 under the auspices of GARA. Their collaboration with Glasgow Science Centre, the Glasgow Film Theatre, and Glasgow City Council's Cultural and Leisure service to deliver the programme marked two features that would become common in the subsequent decades of anti-racist cultural work in Scotland: there was a strong focus on Glasgow, and a dependence on equality and outreach missions from local authorities, civic institutions, and cultural organizations. The first programme opened with a tempered provocation:

Although Glasgow was not a major player in the transatlantic slave trade as were cities such as Liverpool and Bristol, evidence remains of Glasgow's participation in this human exploitation. The Glasgow merchants' exploitation of overseas colonies and especially their involvement in the tobacco, sugar and cotton plantations brought them great wealth and the results of this can be seen in the names of some streets, districts, and in the palatial houses and grand public buildings to be seen in the city (BHM Scotland Programme 2002).⁹

The 2024 BHM Scotland programme opened with a reminder of how the legacy of slavery, empire, and colonization was lived and felt every day:

Despite decades of anti-racism policy, Black and minority ethnic people still face poorer outcomes including a high rate of poverty, child poverty, unemployment and significant housing issues. It is still the case that many schools and history books do not include Black history. The rise of the far right in recent years, demonstrated violently this summer, shows the ways we are still grappling with systemic racism and white supremacy, with Black and minority ethnic people facing this violence daily (BHM Scotland Programme 2024).¹⁰

Scholarship on racism in Scotland and scholarship on Scotland's historical relationship to race have curiously separate lives. This division of labour is itself often racialized. The Scottish historians who have produced the growing number of key texts on Scotland's historical relationship to slavery, empire, and colonization (an area of growth since the early 2000s) have predominantly been white men working in Scottish universities. The cleavage between privileged sites of knowledge and cultural (re)production, as well as community-embedded activism, can be seen in the debates about whether Scotland should have a museum dedicated to anti-racism.

In June 2020, shortly after the statue of Edward Colston was torn down in Bristol, the Scottish Parliament voted in favour of an amendment proposed by the Scottish Greens to establish a museum that would address the nation's historical links to slavery. *Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums (ESSM)* was a two-year project (2020–22) that scoped how museum collections and spaces could be part of a national response to racism that started with acknowledging the extent of Scotland's involvement in empire, slavery, and colonization. Although the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER) had been leading an existing project in this area called the *Empire Museum*,¹¹ the funding and coordination of a new national project (ESSM) was devolved to Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS). While this triggered questions about the ability of MGS to conduct the project as a white-led organization with no substantial expertise in leading anti-racist initiatives, it also invited the possibility of an accelerated reckoning with entrenched problems in the sector, and most notably within the Scottish sector's national development body. MGS appointed a Steering Committee and Advisory Group with the aim of sourcing diverse forms of lived experience and knowledge. In the next section, we explore how museum workers and racially minoritized communities responded to this unprecedented level of public and sector-wide debate and activism addressing racism in Scotland.

Surveys about Scotland, Race, and Empire

ESSM led the delivery of Scotland's largest consultation on museums and the legacies of empire, slavery, and colonization. This included focus groups with racially minoritized people (80 participants), focus groups with museum workers (over 250 participants), and a public survey (with over 4500 respondents). This was supported by other heritage-related surveys being conducted in Scotland at the time, including one by the project EDI in Scottish Heritage (EDISH) in 2021–2022 (55 respondents to a survey for museum professionals; 40 participants in a focus group for racially minoritized communities). As funders (including government, national research funders, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund) ringfenced support for urgent equalities-focused research and practice, several initiatives with similar objectives, but often divergent imperatives, emerged simultaneously in Scotland. This was partly a response to the “lack” of work already existing in Scotland, which was accompanied by survey fatigue, especially from racially minoritized communities who found themselves consulted across sectors (particularly those relating to health, education, and heritage). An unintentional competition emerged as organizations with workers on new short-term contracts began planning for the longer-term financial sustainability of their projects. In this context, the cultural and economic infrastructure that might produce structural change was undermined by project-based delivery driven by competition, whether for financial resource or the time and attention of museum professionals and marginalized communities.

Given the dearth of museum professionals from racialized backgrounds in Scotland, especially in open-ended or more senior roles, the sector turned to broader definitions of heritage expertise that introduced new power dynamics between professional white museum workers (often from economically privileged backgrounds) and minoritized communities living with multiple vectors of precarity. This process reinforced the centrality of whiteness in museum cultures: the outreach towards what was perceived as “different” revealed the anchoring of sector norms and assumptions in a whiteness that received minimal critique but much apology (for example, in the form of institutions acknowledging that they had directly benefited from the financial proceeds of slavery).

As part of EDISH, important data was generated through interviews with participants who responded to two racially minoritized researchers from LGBTQ+ and working-class backgrounds. While we recognized the cultural capital of working in a university would influence how racialized minorities received our questions in focus groups, we were able to offer a space to respond outwith the formal museum sector and outside the fear of managing white fragility. When we asked museum workers about their response to BLM, their focus was on filling a potential blank rather than scrutiny of the undergirding assumptions, practices, and beliefs that had produced the status quo:

‘We continued our diversity services as planned, while reviewing the collection and identifying any local connections to slavery.’

‘[We] actively sought to acquire artworks by Black and Asian artists for our collections.’

‘We hosted a temporary photographic exhibition on Scottish Caribbean connections and took part in an online event on this topic.’

‘Student dissertation[s]w[ere] worked on collaboratively which gauged responses to the museum post-BLM and if there has been any recommendations/policy changes’.

There was a mixed response from museum workers about whether the response to BLM was adequate in Scotland (every response qualified their “yes”/ “no” answer). Amongst “no” respondents, confidence was particularly low in current approaches:

‘No. I think there is willingness, but not enough support from senior staff/board members’.

'No. We have centuries of racism to confront and tackle, so it will require deep interrogation, investment of resources, permanent work rather than short-term projects, and doing things because it's the right thing to do rather than because it looks good'.

'...probably not – everything seems to be focused on slavery rather than looking at positive history of BAME contributions to Scottish culture and society'.

'No! From what I can tell, a lot of work started in 2020, but this should have been happening for years and I'm worried that the momentum won't last. We seem to be patting ourselves on the back while forgetting that nothing was being done in 2019. I don't think the root causes of these issues are being addressed'.

Two-thirds of respondents agreed that there was enough expertise to support and undertake work on race and heritage in Scotland. Those who thought there was not enough expertise flagged concerns at the volume of work outsourced to racialized minorities (with accompanying fears of burnout), and a concern at the ease with which some white workers had positioned themselves as experts in anti-racism and EDI after limited training. This effectively worked to re-centre whiteness as racially minoritized people were positioned as purveyors of authenticity that white workers could then rework and recycle into outputs and outcomes that directly benefited their careers. One museum worker from a racially minoritized background pointed to how this perpetuated the quality control of "expertise" within a narrow pool: 'again it's white people claiming to be experts in BAME peoples' histories and experience'. Without naming whiteness, one respondent identified where they thought the heaviest area of response and responsibility should lie: 'I feel that there is a danger that we are putting the responsibility on to groups of people of colour and that the emotional strain of this is a massive burden and it isn't their issue to solve'.

Within networks for racially minoritized groups we also observed a hierarchy of participation, whereby some positioned themselves as open for engagement with organizations that had perceived influence (especially in securing future funding). While these are not uncommon consequences of how equalities policy and funding have influenced behaviours, their effects can be amplified in a "small place" where tight networks of influence in community gatekeeping and policy can have an outsized impact. One Roma community group reported going to several museums and seeing no representation of their community. Another respondent flagged their consistent experience of reading museum labels which casually collapsed ethnic, racialized, and regional difference in Bangladesh. A focus group with Black respondents discussed the emphasis on slavery and degrading depictions of Blackness in museums, a move that was often designed to shock white audiences while also standing in for the quota of allowed representations of Black life. These are examples of the uneven purchase of diversity or decolonization-focused initiatives in museums. One racially minoritized museum worker stated: 'as a Black person, school seems to do everything to disconnect you from learning about your heritage'. This was supported by other comments from racially minoritized museum workers who pointed to: 'the centring of whiteness in everything: displays, services (food, drink, facilities), research, events'. The relative lack of racially minoritized museum workers in Scotland (who often find themselves as the "only one") presents a challenge for diversifying the workforce.

When the topic of diversifying the museum workforce came up in focus groups, respondents did not provide much hope for the future. Generally, all our focus groups agreed that children from racially minoritized and migrant backgrounds are encouraged to study STEM subjects because these jobs tended to have the best chance of good and stable pay. Routes into the heritage workforce were identified as being highly competitive (positions can depend on "who you know"), with an expectation that there will be periods of low or unpaid work. This finding contradicts some of the practices in the museum sector in Scotland, where there is an assumption that if racialized minorities and migrant communities are given more information about the heritage sector, it will help to drive recruitment. While this may have an effect, it does little to address the concerns of communities who are more likely to face economic insecurity,

and who are more wary of how discrimination may impact longer-term progression in careers. Our focus groups pointed to informed and calculated decisions based on the experience of structural inequality, rather than an often-assumed deficit model in which communities need to understand routes into the heritage sector. The casualization of the broader museum and heritage workforce and the reliance on volunteering have entrenched basic forms of inequality where “word of mouth” and access to other forms of income become necessities. In this context, who can afford to work in museums, especially if this relies on unpaid work? If part of the benefit of unpaid museum work is a sense of belonging and community, to what extent is this feasible for racialized volunteers? A focus group respondent linked these points more broadly to why racialized minorities may also be discouraged from pursuing arts and humanities subjects at university, which in the longer term has significant consequences for the expertise base underpinning the broader heritage sector.

Despite ESSM public consultation showing that the public overwhelmingly find museums to be welcoming, our focus groups unpacked some of the tacit ways in which museums are encoded with a whiteness that keeps racially minoritized communities in sites of belonging that remain adjacent to national stories or national heritage. Focus group respondents described museums as “highly scrutinized spaces”, especially for particular bodies:

...you've got security cameras, and minority ethnic communities because of lots of issues are highly securitized communities. They're very racialized, there's issues of Islamophobia, so I think these spaces with heightened securitisation already are spaces that become inaccessible because of that.

The powerlines of whiteness were described variously by focus groups and in the survey, from museums being described as “ivory tower type” institutions, to the surveillance of entry points and “othering” of racialized bodies (often through their negative depiction). One group of Muslim and African women described joining a heritage tour only to be stopped (more than once) by white people who assumed they were lost and were looking for something else. Is “Scottish heritage” only appropriate for white people? This was seemingly the assumption of one person who corrected the desire on the part of one our focus group respondents to see more cultural heritage from their country of origin in museums with the assertion that they should rather identify with Scotland (i.e. whiteness). If racialized minorities, especially those belonging to communities facing additional public hostility (such as Muslim women wearing headscarves), already feel socially marginalized, the unspoken cultural rules of museum spaces pose another hurdle for more recent migrant communities. For example, one focus group described the paradox that public museums frame themselves as free and welcoming spaces while negatively responding to groups or bodies they found “noisy”.

Reflections on the White Thinking Project

Essentially, through its surveys and focus groups, EDISH contributed to the growing evidence base that demonstrates diversity programmes are too often used to reinforce existing power hierarchies, with diversity being “ticked off” as a discrete training or outreach goal. Our recent AHRC-funded project, “White Thinking” and the Failed Promise of Diversity in Scottish Heritage (November 2023–October 2024) aimed to build on the work done by EDISH by responding to a key question facing the Scottish heritage sector: what is the next step in transitioning from small-scale diversity projects in Scottish heritage organizations (often led by individuals and/or small collectives) to more sustainable and structural forms of organizational and cultural change in a sector which remains predominantly white and where heritage professionals emerge from higher socio-economic backgrounds?

Primarily, we wanted to move beyond the potential for tokenism in organizing one-off projects without embedding structural change. We are wary of the danger of each new project constantly starting from scratch without a clear sense of its position within an evolving culture of decolonization across the museum sector in Scotland. In so doing, our project explicitly responded to recommendations two and three from the report produced by the Empire, Slavery, and Scotland’s Museums project: ‘museums should ensure anti-racism is embedded in their workplaces and public spaces’, and ‘museums should involve the people

of Scotland in shaping their work through co-production, to promote cultural democracy and participation for all'.

The participation of MGS, the national development body which supports more than 400 museums and galleries, was crucial to the project as this allowed us to position our project within the framework of wider decolonial initiatives, with the objective that any lessons learned from the project would be made available to institutions across Scotland. In designing the project, we were keen to work with as wide a range of heritage organizations as possible (five in total), in order to better understand the challenges faced by different types of museums, from large national or municipal organizations to small, independent museums. As has been outlined above, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery is a large municipal museum, the most visited heritage institution in Scotland's largest city: its challenge was to sustain a commitment to decolonizing its collections in the face of the complex, bureaucratic processes of a large municipal institution that must contend with many competing demands for resources and attention. We also worked with much smaller museums who face very different challenges. We helped to design educational resources centred on recent decolonial work on the collections at the David Livingstone Birthplace Museum – a small, independent but very dynamic heritage institution in Blantyre on the outskirts of Glasgow. We also worked with colleagues in Dundee at HMS Unicorn, a 200-year-old Royal Navy training ship, which is a much-beloved local institution, but which has struggled to attract local minority communities. The project was thus an opportunity to diversify the themes and narratives in the museum through bringing in different, potentially non-English-speaking groups, to a small community-centred heritage space. At the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons (Glasgow), we continued work begun in the EDISH project to highlight the histories of South Asian people who have studied at the college since the colonial era. Another strand brought together the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (SoAoS), founded in 1780, one of the oldest and most influential learned societies focussing on all aspects of Scotland's cultural heritage, and the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, which is at the forefront of developing and delivering anti-racist strategy, policy, and advocacy in Scotland. Our collaboration allowed CRER to develop an in-depth working relationship with SoAoS which has been focused on supporting structural change within an influential organization that draws on a relatively narrow section of the Scottish population for its membership, and for its operational staff and management.

Collectively, this work has focussed on developing a capacity for critical self-reflection within organizations, with the aim of underpinning the development of new resources and strategies for "engaging" with audiences. This has included SoAoS's fundamental questioning of the constituencies it serves (leading to work on its constitution and structures), and the work of RCPSEG to literally and figuratively create space for stories and representations of South Asians in Scotland.

In this final section of the article, we will focus more closely on the collaboration between Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery and the Lilian Thuram Foundation. Thuram first toured the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition in March 2024 (having previously visited the museum briefly in June 2022). As a late Victorian museum space (which opened in 1901), Kelvingrove is a grand, rather gothic space with ornate staircases and an imposing central hall, around which a labyrinth of large and small gallery spaces is organized. *Glasgow, City of Empire* is situated on the south balcony in a relatively tight space, which means that some of the exhibits spill over into the surrounding corridor spaces. In one of these spaces stands a large oil painting by John Lavery titled *State Visit of her Majesty, Queen Victoria, to the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1888*, which celebrates the event that gave rise to the present museum, as Kelvingrove was built from the proceeds of the 1888 exhibition. To the casual contemporary viewer, the painting might well initially appear to be one of those formal, slightly stuffy images from another time, depicting regal authority, men in uniform, and women in (mostly) dark evening wear. However, the museum has installed a touch screen beside the painting, which allows the visitor to discover more about a selection of important figures depicted by Lavery and their role (military or financial or both) within the hierarchies of empire. We visited the exhibition with Lilian Thuram on two occasions, and his eye was repeatedly drawn to the Lavery painting. A welcome video to *Glasgow, City of Empire* sits around the corner from the Lavery painting, as that is where the bulk of the new exhibition lies.

However, for Thuram, the most instructive starting point for any tour of the exhibition would be the Lavery painting, for in his view it laid bare the military, political, and economic forces that underpinned empire. In effect, the painting acted as a distillation of Thuram's concept of 'white thinking', revealing the racial and economic hierarchies that often remain veiled or hidden.

Thuram's initial tour of the exhibition was followed the next day by a workshop with a visiting group of approximately twenty secondary school pupils across the age range from S2-S6 (second to final year in Scottish high schools). The aim was to explore the types of educational resources that might be used to encourage schoolchildren to engage further with the topics raised by the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition. In addition to his focus on the Lavery painting, Thuram picked up on key issues to be explored with pupils, focusing in particular on the importance of the words we use to speak about slavery and empire, and, what this choice of words reveals about how we position ourselves in relation to history. Thuram's use in the workshop of his foundation's "upside down" map of the world, which places Africa at the centre of the globe in its true proportions, proved particularly successful in encouraging pupils to question their perceptions of history. In addition to the school visit, the session was attended by senior curators and educational staff from the museum. This participation of a wider group of staff beyond the team involved in the development of *Glasgow, City of Empire* was particularly important in seeking to ensure that the decolonization of the museum's collections was situated within a holistic vision for the institution rather than the preserve of a specific curatorial team.

In follow-up meetings between the project team, the Curator for Legacies of Slavery and Empire, and the Educational Lead at the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, it was agreed that the most productive next step would be for Lilian Thuram to deliver a similar workshop for museum staff (curators and educational staff from Kelvingrove and a range of other Scottish museums). Within heritage institutions, efforts at decolonization are often driven by motivated individuals, but this does not guarantee wider institutional "buy in". Some colleagues may feel they lack the knowledge and expertise and, given the extent to which museums have become bound up in contemporary culture wars, there is often anxiety about engagement on these issues: 'among museum professionals, there is a palpable and sometimes debilitating fear of making mistakes, with all of the professional and reputational damage that would bring' (Bunning 2021: 3). Moreover, many (white, middle-class) senior managers 'admit they do not know where to start or how to engage in such a difficult territory' (2021: 7). In light of this, we were keen to explore the potential to embed a wider institutional culture in which all staff feel motivated and sufficiently knowledgeable to engage with a decolonial agenda, especially within the wider context of austerity budgets and cutbacks for the heritage sector (a context in which the promotion of a decolonial agenda, while other areas experience cutbacks, might lead to tensions).

Thuram's workshop for staff in June 2024 began with a group tour of the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition, following some of the ideas developed in the student tour several months previously. The workshop provided a rare and crucial space to discuss race and anti-racism within the work environment. It was not a tick-box exercise in which the significance of "diversity" was highlighted as something museums should promote, but rather a discussion of how racial hierarchies emerged from ongoing systems of exploitation, of which museums were a beneficiary. Thuram's stature and ability to communicate across audiences helped to advocate for the importance of the work, including once again to senior management. While relatively few staff work exclusively on histories of slavery and empire within their usual remit, the session made clear that these histories and legacies are present across the museum. The workshop received very positive feedback and apparently revitalized staff enthusiasm and commitment to the task of decolonizing collections. We are not suggesting that a single workshop managed to convince all those present of the need to commit to a radical, decolonial agenda. As Tuck and Yang remind us, '[t]he desire to reconcile is just as relentless as the desire to not have to deal with this [...] problem anymore' (2012: 9). Essentially, the workshop underlined that the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition was the start, not the end, of a difficult, potentially arduous process.

As has been mentioned above, a key tool used by Thuram in both workshops to illustrate his argument about normative whiteness was the "upside down" map of the world, which

places Africa at the centre, with all of the continents represented in their true proportions. In the two workshops carried out with both visiting secondary school pupils and heritage professionals, the response from many audience members to Thuram holding up his map was to immediately tell him that he was holding it the wrong way round. His response was as follows: 'but the world is round like a football. How can it have a top and a bottom?'. In both instances, this initiated a discussion about the ways in which we internalize "natural" phenomena that have in fact been deliberately constructed. Lilian Thuram's charisma, easy humour, and quiet intelligence created the possibility for an open discussion about whiteness in a "safe space" where the focus is on how "learned" racial thinking can be identified, examined, and ultimately "unlearned". His personal qualities may not be easily replicable, but Thuram's approach offers a model for museums to interrogate how we frame the past in ways that focus on making structures of inequality visible, going beyond calls to recognize or celebrate "diversity". Indeed, Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery has now installed the Lilian Thuram Foundation map at the centre of the *Glasgow, City of Empire* exhibition as an invitation to visitors to question their assumptions and to promote receptiveness to alternative versions of history.

In addition to the installation of the map, other tangible, practical outcomes include the development of educational resources to complement *Glasgow, City of Empire*, which has already established itself as the second most popular school workshop at Kelvingrove. Following the conclusion of the project in late 2024, we have been working on the project report, which seeks to draw together a set of both resources and lessons learned that might be useful both to colleagues across the heritage sector and to anti-racism organizations. Key issues include: the development of an accessible repository of materials drawn from decolonial initiatives over the past 10 years; establishing a network of heritage professionals, academics, and community groups capable of developing future projects; and recognition that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions (e.g. there are major differences between the challenges facing, and opportunities available to, colleagues in a major institution such as Kelvingrove, and those in a much smaller institution such as the David Livingstone Birthplace Museum, which has far fewer resources but whose size can make it far more agile). Clearly, such practical achievements by themselves do not make for sustained structural change, and to imagine that they do would be to indulge in 'settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation' (Tuck and Yang 2012: 4). Instead, we need to recognize that individual projects might well increase diversity but, by themselves, they cannot hope to decolonize heritage institutions.

Conclusion

The public assembly on racism in Scotland held in February 2025, which we cited at the beginning of this article, was partly structured around a series of provocations. Zandra Yeaman, the Curator of Discomfort at the Hunterian Museum (and long-time anti-racist activist), used Audre Lorde's imperative to abandon the master's tools to question the efficacy of working within institutions on EDI initiatives, which may smooth some edges but do little to touch, disturb, or dismantle white supremacy. We recognize our own potential complicity in this work. Are we seeding the potential for lasting change or simply providing institutions with new tools to unpick the threads of anti-racist influence at some future point (no doubt when funding is cut or when public scrutiny shifts)? Both can be true at once. If public funding and public space are intended to benefit the collective, then laying claim to that funding and those spaces is a disruptive act. But without investment in programmes of structural change, and without long-term plans and investment in building the talent pipelines of the future, so much of this work becomes precarious. Decolonization is not a discrete project but rather an ongoing commitment to structural transformation.

"Diversity fails" can apply in two senses. It can refer to the failure hardwired into diversity through its flawed logic (diversity will always be the other), and the inevitable failure to recognize and value diversity on equal terms (which would necessitate dismantling whiteness). The concluding event for our "White Thinking" project was a public discussion with Lilian Thuram at the University of Strathclyde, as part of its Black History Month programme in October 2024. The event was attended by a wide range of people, from school groups (including large

numbers of pupils from the African diaspora), to heritage sector professionals, interested members of the public, and even an entire refugee football team from a local suburb. This was a far more diverse audience than is usually attracted to events at the university, which caused us to reflect on efforts to decolonize predominantly white heritage (and educational) spaces. No doubt many people attended primarily to see a famous former football star, but many in the audience clearly cared about the intersection of race and heritage. For people of colour, Thuram's status as a black man from the French Caribbean represented a diasporic identity shaped by shared oppression but also elevated by criticality and empowerment. Can such an audience thrive within the confines of the institutions and knowledge practices which undergird heritage? It is ever more urgent to find workable solutions to these problems, for while we might decry the tokenism of some EDI efforts to promote "diversity", the right-wing backlash against so-called "critical race theory" in the UK and the current Trump government assault on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives in the US, are a stark warning that the clock can be turned back on even the timid progress of the past few decades.

Theoretically our research seeks to contribute to current critical understandings of decolonization by evidencing that effective decolonial work must be conceived as a staggered, iterative process that requires mechanisms for continuous institutional self-reflection. As this article has repeatedly argued, decolonization cannot be understood as an isolated intervention but must be contextualized within longer histories of anti-racist community activism, especially in national contexts that sit uncomfortably within conceptions of "British" and/or "Scottish" heritage. The emotional labour demanded by decolonization – its necessary discomfort and unsettling potential – is deployed to challenge visitors' complicity in national amnesia. Somewhat paradoxically, however, as Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, aligning the participation of racially minoritized community members with narratives that can be readily co-opted by the museum's "internationalization" goals means that "decolonization" initiatives can end up disrupting the critical potential of a messy but layered dialogue: essentially, decolonial critique can become an institutional branding exercise.

This process neutralizes the radical potential of an inherently messy, contradictory dialogue between communities, institutions, and historical legacies. As Corinne A. Kratz and Ciraj Rassool remind us, any attempt to transform a museum must 'always require negotiating the political economies of resources and power that help define the very terms of engagement'. Such a process is not easy but 'these are challenges that must be undertaken boldly, with no fear of friction' (2012: 356). Rather than continuing these patterns of institutional capture, Scottish heritage organizations must act without 'fear of friction' and grapple seriously with Tuck and Yang's principle of 'incommensurability' – that is, accepting that genuine decolonization cannot be reconciled with institutional self-preservation or 'settler' comfort. This requires the acknowledgement that decolonial work fundamentally challenges the legitimacy of existing heritage frameworks, demanding not reform but transformation that prioritizes previously marginalized sovereignty and knowledge systems over institutional continuity. Essentially, the reason that "diversity fails" in Scottish heritage is because the piecemeal promotion of diversity is incapable of producing profound structural and organizational change.

Notes

- ¹ Neil Mackay, "Men with Bats Shouted the N-Word": Gary Younge on Racism in Scotland', *The Herald* 2023. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/politics/23396522.men-bats-shouted-n-word-gary-younge-racism-scotland/>, accessed 1 March 2025.
- ² The research and knowledge exchange activities discussed in this article were undertaken as part of two AHRC-funded projects: EDI in Scottish Heritage (grant ref: AH/V010352/1), and "White Thinking" and the Failed Promise of Diversity in Scottish Heritage (grant ref: AH/X011682/1).
- ³ The definition of "decolonizing" and its critique can be tied to our discussion of Nirmal Puwar and Sara Ahmed, focusing on the performative aspect of institutional backing that makes specific identitarian positions visible within the Scottish heritage space that then take up the onus of validating the process of decolonization which is an essentially

uneven and conflicted terrain. Our approach to the use of the term “decolonization” in the museum space is informed by the work of Tuck and Yang, especially its deployment as a superficial slogan that obviates the need for institutions to consider the fuller implications of reparative justice (2012). This is aligned to what Tuck and Yang (working in the US context) describe as ‘settler moves to innocence’, namely strategies settlers use to alleviate guilt while maintaining privilege (9). The affective charge – the discomfort – essential to decolonization is deployed to disrupt the individual museum visitor’s self-validation of forms of national amnesia reinscribed by the museum space.

- 4 On the project Curating Discomfort see: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/changing-museum/curating-discomfort/> (accessed on 10 September 2025).
- 5 The controversy around diversity in museums is hardly new. The 1980s marked a step change in the professionalization of equalities in Britain as local authorities responded to changes in equalities legislation in the wake of long-standing anti-racist civil rights campaigns. The Labour-run Greater London Council (abolished in 1986 by Thatcher) was at the forefront of developing what we might now call intersectional approaches to tackling structural inequalities through culture-related labour. This included funding for equalities units that prioritized staff with lived experience of inequalities, including paid representation from under-represented communities. Museums were recognized as a key part of the cultural and educational infrastructure for delivering change. But this work was far from easy, and objections made at the time, claiming that these new museological approaches prioritized minorities over the needs of the dominant white community, have not disappeared.
- 6 A particularly Scottish hallmark of *No Problem Here* (2018) is the collection’s emphasis on the role of sectarianism and racism in Scotland, especially in relation to the Irish Catholic, Roma, and traveller communities. Forms of political blackness in the 1980s had a significant impact in creating coalitions of communities marginalized by Anglo-Protestant whiteness.
- 7 Christine Whyte, ‘Boot the Wellington: The Growing Resistance to Glasgow’s Colonial Monuments’, Counterfire 2020. <https://www.counterfire.org/article/boot-the-wellington-the-growing-resistance-to-glasgow-s-colonial-monuments>, accessed 1 March 2025.
- 8 Angus Cochrane, ‘Glasgow Council Reveals Cost of Rangers Rampage in George Square’, The National 2021. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19327289.glasgow-council-reveals-cost-rangers-rampage-george-square/>, accessed 1 March 2025.
- 9 The programmes for BHM Scotland are archived online. See Black History Month Scotland: <https://www.blackhistorymonthscotland.org/gallery> (accessed 15 December 2025).
- 10 See: <https://www.blackhistorymonthscotland.org/gallery> (accessed 15 December 2025).
- 11 The programme was responding to the race riots in England in the summer of 2024. Although there were threats and rumours of similar organized racist violence in Scotland, especially Glasgow, this did not eventually occur.

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