

Challenging Embedded Whiteness in Museums

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Abstract

Despite decades of initiatives towards greater diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector in the UK, there is now an abundance of evidence to show that such work has not created the conditions for significant and lasting change towards challenging racism and advancing race equity, and that alternative approaches are needed (Arokiasamy 2023; Ali and Byrne 2022). In this context, questions emerge around the limitations of current approaches, the ethical issues that arise in equity and diversity work, and the underlying causes of ongoing racial inequality in the sector. Increasingly, cultural organisations are being understood as sites of embedded whiteness – deeply embedded systems of power through which a “white-as-the-norm” culture and experience is prioritized – that are ill-equipped and, in many cases, unwilling, to drive forward the levels of organisational and structural change required to drive inclusive organisational transformation. The ways in which power, privilege, and whiteness manifest in the cultural sector remain profoundly under-researched and are frequently marginalized in professional discourse. Based on findings from a three-year action research project with London Museum, we argue in this paper that a direct and uncompromising focus on whiteness and how it operates in our day-to-day lives and contexts can, if approached as part of the supportive and careful development of staff and leaders, offer challenging yet productive and deeply transformative routes towards recognizing and addressing racism, and advancing more equitable ways of working. Sustained research with a single institution illustrates how these findings hold great significance for expanding and deepening approaches to anti-racist practice within cultural organisations, and within the wider sector.

Key words: institutional racism, whiteness, museums, cultural diversity

Introduction

Despite decades of initiatives towards greater diversity and inclusion in the cultural sector in the UK, there is now an abundance of evidence to show that such work has not created the conditions for significant and lasting change towards challenging racism and advancing race equity, and that alternative approaches are needed (Arokiasamy 2023; Ali and Byrne 2022). In this context, questions emerge around the limitations of current approaches, the ethical issues that arise in equity and diversity work, and the underlying causes of ongoing racial inequality in the sector. Increasingly, cultural organisations are being understood as sites of embedded whiteness – deeply embedded systems of power through which a “white-as-the-norm” culture and experience is prioritized – that are ill-equipped and, in many cases, unwilling to drive forward the levels of organisational and structural change required to drive inclusive organisational transformation. The ways in which power, privilege, and whiteness manifest in the cultural sector remain profoundly under-researched and are frequently marginalized in professional discourse. Based on findings from a three-year action research

project, we argue that a direct and uncompromising focus on whiteness and how it operates in our day-to-day lives and contexts can, if approached as part of the supportive and careful development of staff and leaders, offer challenging yet productive and deeply transformative routes towards recognizing and addressing racism, and advancing more equitable ways of working. Sustained research with a single institution illustrates how these findings hold great significance for expanding and deepening approaches to anti-racist practice within cultural organisations, and within the wider sector.

This paper distils the learning from an action-research project undertaken with London Museum (formerly Museum of London) between October 2020 and December 2023, which set out to explore, understand, and challenge embedded whiteness in museums. Over this period, a Core Research Group comprising researchers from the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester and a group of staff drawn from across London Museum, comprising a senior leader, a visitor services manager, and three members of the curatorial team, worked collectively to support colleagues across the museum to understand, reflect upon, and disrupt 'embedded whiteness'; a form of power embedded within many institutions, through which a "white-as-the-norm" culture and experience is prioritized.¹ In this project, the concept of "whiteness" refers to ongoing legacies of historical power structures rather than an identity, culture, or ethnicity.

Through a deeply collaborative process embedded in the workings of London Museum, involving around 80 staff from across the organisation, the team worked to: design and deliver a project which gathered insights into the features of the workplace culture, practices and processes at the museum, as well as levels of institutional and individual understanding of and sensitivity to race equity; map an understanding of the culture onto scholarship that details characteristics of a "white-as-the-norm" culture; expose expanding numbers of London Museum staff to scholarship on embedded whiteness, including the 30 person-strong (then) all-white Senior Leadership Team,¹ as well as facilitating deep reflection on its significance for the museum; and, based on the insights generated, create a series of actions to disrupt and challenge manifestations of whiteness, and explore where and how whiteness re-emerges within these processes.²

Following a review of relevant scholarship on which the project was based, this paper sets out the action research methodology, as well as some of the key reflections and observations to emerge from the research. It unpicks the challenges of a project which, unlike many approaches to race and racism in museums where emphasis has tended to be placed on the experiences of people of colour (Bunning 2021; Wajid and Minott 2019), asks a large group of majority-white staff and leaders in one museum to engage with the concept of whiteness as a mechanism to reflect on structures, practices, and ways of thinking and being. Staff explored the way that whiteness as a form of power benefits some more than others and explored their own entanglements and complicities in the marginalization of people of colour in museums and in society.³ The conclusion reflects upon the scale of work that is needed to advance equity in ways that surface and act upon deeper, structural inequalities within cultural organisations. Significantly, the research considers the potential of the concept of whiteness, and the importance of the processes of action research which, if sustained and given space in the day-to-day work of museums, can drive significant organisation-level learning, development, and change.

The limitations of diversity discourses

Research into racism in the UK and beyond broadly tells us that racism is pervasive and fostered and reproduced at several levels in society – namely, institutional, cultural and (inter) personal levels – which combine to affect policies, behaviours, and norms that can discriminate and 'other' people in everyday life (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Jung 2015).⁴ Our intention was to draw on insights from existing research and scholarship that addressed the underlying causes of racism as they reproduce within institutions and the workplace, namely by focusing on the organisation itself as a racial structure (Ray 2019), as well as the policies and ways of working that perpetuate inequities and harmful, racializing ideas. Underscoring the social production and reproduction of racism, critical race theory highlights the normalization of racism in our

lives and institutions (Ahmed 2012; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Monbaron 2024). As Nicola Rollock and David Gillborn (2011) note, 'racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable'.⁵ Within "white-as-the-norm" environments and institutions, concepts such as 'colour-blindness' (where people are socialized to feel uncomfortable about noticing race), and a belief in meritocracy, can be understood as ways in which many people can reframe and distance themselves from any relationship to, or complicity in, reproducing a racializing "white-as-the-norm" environment (Hartlep 2009: 6-7). Addressing embedded whiteness becomes, then, a matter of 'unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations' (Ladson-Billings 2011).

Within the museum and wider cultural sectors in the UK, the concept of 'whiteness', and calls to look deeply at the professional discourses and approaches that sustain whiteness, are not new, but research and activism over the last two decades has dramatically underscored the need for systemic and cultural change in the field.⁶ In 2011 a report on cultural diversity for Arts Council England argued that institutional initiatives to increase diversity in the arts have done little to change the landscape of underrepresentation, noting that institutional "diversity" discourses are often activated performatively, in ways that are delinked from inequality, human rights, and social justice work (Fisher 2011). Diversity policies are understood to operate on a deficit model that essentializes ethnicity, while implying a 'majority monoculture against which all else is "diverse"' (ibid.). More than a decade on, the UK cultural sector has struggled to shift the demographic of both its visitors and staff. Nirmal Puwar's insights into the production of a "somatic norm" in institutional spaces continues to resonate with colleagues in the sector today (Puwar 2004). Many organisations continue to deploy coded racializing ideas that conceptualize established (typically white, highly educated) audiences as "core" and new or under-served audiences as "diverse" (Moore et al. 2022). Diversity – and increasingly decolonization – continue to be championed as antidotes to exclusion without an attendant commitment to the need for deeper structural and cultural organisational change (Naidoo 2024). A deficit model of inclusion continues, where minoritized individuals and groups are invited to participate within, and transform, predominantly white spaces, undertaken without recognition of the ongoing systemic barriers and institutional cultures that contribute to experiences of racism and "othering" (Wajid and Minott 2019). In this climate, and despite decades of diversity initiatives, museum audiences and workforces remain disproportionately white, highly educated, and middle class (ACE 2019, 2022; Brook et al. 2018, 2020). Creativity, opportunity, and contribution continue to be curtailed for those racialized by the system (Naidoo 2023).

In 2020 the heightened consciousness generated by the groundswell of the Black Lives Matter protests made visible, and demanded the disruption of, the normalizing of institutional racism. Under the pressure of potential exposure and reputational risk, cultural organisations across the globe felt compelled to assert a public commitment to anti-racism. As part of a resulting shift in the landscape of race equity work, the concept of whiteness as a normative status, operating through the organisational cultures and professional discourses of the museum and cultural sectors, has become increasingly recognized and open to scrutiny (Art Fund 2022; Wajid pers. comm). Yet, as race equity scholars have argued, this moment of heightened racial awareness (and calls for racial justice) has also been met with a predictable rise in forms of whiteness as a way to manage and contain the threat of radical change (Bunning 2021; Kendi 2016). Institutional statements were carefully worded by senior leaders, often without fuller conversations across the staff body, and were often felt by many to be laden with opportunism and performativity (Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022).⁷ Museums that responded to Black Lives Matter with greater authenticity, such as the Museum of the Home in London, were cautioned by funders and Government for being too 'political' (Kendall Adams 2021).⁸

At the same time, critical race scholarship and whiteness studies – areas of research which focus on the structural aspects of racism – were increasingly vilified as divisive and dangerous 'woke' ideologies by a number of Conservative politicians.⁹ Articles such as 'Time to end the teaching of divisive critical race theory in British schools' appeared in the right-leaning press¹⁰, and the final report of the Government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) questioned the prevalence of structural racism in the UK. In a UK parliamentary debate

in 2020, the (then) Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch stated, ‘we do not want teachers to teach their white pupils about white privilege and inherited racial guilt’ (Badenoch 2020).¹¹ For scholars such as Ibram X. Kendi (2016), responses of this kind to the Black Lives Matter movement could be understood as whiteness at work; the emergence and ongoing adaptation of a suite of strategies that effectively uphold white supremacist legacies. Such strategies can be understood as part of the predictable and ongoing evolution of racist ideas that emerge at particular moments of Black empowerment, in order to manage and contain the threat of radical change in the status quo global order (Kendi 2016). Within this climate, the research team were highly cognisant of the tendency for whiteness to be reproduced through the work of the museum and the research itself, and sought to understand and unpack the institutional structures, cultures, and professional discourses that enabled our inherited whiteness – our racializing status quo – to continue.

While entrenched and embedded over many centuries, through ideas of white superiority and colonialist entitlement over global resources, whiteness has been theorized as a constructed and reconstructed form of power that can be effectively challenged through the redesigning of policies and institutions (Kendi 2016; Hunter, n.d.; Bobo 2012). Educators Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun explore how the sustaining of harmful and limiting “white-as-the-norm” institutional cultures are often characteristics of an organisation that stifles organisational change.¹² They identify 13 facets of a culture based on white supremacy: perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress is bigger/more, objectivity, and the right to comfort. Institutions which create ‘a sense of urgency’ can, for example, make it difficult to engage in thoughtful decision-making and to try new ways of working, while ‘fear of open conflict’ and ‘defensiveness’ can create working environments where it is difficult to speak up and challenge the status quo (MASS Action Toolkit, 29).

Drawing on Jones and Okun’s work among others, John Murawski (2021) theorized elements of “white dominant culture” in organisations that “protect power”, encourage “competition and struggle for limited resources”, and centre “professional and transactional relationships”. Murawski advocates “interrupting” these organisational cultures through more collective and care-centred practices, where power is distributed and relationships are based on shared commitments and decision-making (ibid.). Addressing the structural and cultural aspects of racism and turning our attention to the way whiteness is sustained and reproduced, can be understood to complement and foster the many ways that racism and oppression can be addressed in museums. Examining and disrupting embedded forms of whiteness within institutional policies and practices, organisational cultures, interpersonal relations and behaviours, and the wider system in which they sit, becomes a necessary process if institutions are to shift entrenched biases, attract and retain expertise and talent within the workforce, secure ongoing societal legitimacy, and meaningfully fulfil their potential to contribute to the addressing and dismantling of racism. Scholarship and practice that directly applies concepts and characteristics of whiteness to museums is, however, in its infancy. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging field by developing concrete and grounded insights into whiteness as a form of power as it plays out within a single organisation, through an action research methodology.

The research context at London Museum

As in many cultural organisations, the events of 2020 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter protests galvanized some colleagues at London Museum to ask more of their leadership and organisation in relation to growing expectations that museums take an explicitly anti-racist stance. Linked to this, the mounting demands for change at this time called into question the efficacy and suitability of existing approaches to race equity across the sector; a rising awareness that was equally evident at London Museum. Echoing experiences across the sector more widely, some colleagues at the museum were expressing feelings of exhaustion and discomfort in response to Leadership’s calls on staff with lived experience of racism to help the Senior Leadership Team chart a path through increasingly vocal expectations and demands, and the museum’s network for staff of colour had disbanded in response to the

additional demands placed on it and the feeling of lack of institutional support amongst its members. Staff across the museum were frustrated that long-standing work to disrupt and challenge the status quo – for example through programming, advisory groups, and the championing of new ways of working – had not felt appropriately recognized or valued by the Senior Leadership Team. Attention was turning to the entrenched forms of whiteness and the need to shift the focus away from the experiences of colleagues of colour, and focus more explicitly on the experiences and behaviours of all colleagues to address the cultures and norms of the organisation (Wajid, pers. comm). At the same time, testimonies of museum workers across the sector were drawing heightened attention to institutional racism and classism, and the absence of adequate institutional commitment to address these issues (Monserrat et al. 2020).¹³ It was this context and the recognition of the inadequacy of museums' responses to the Black Lives Matter protests that provided the conditions within which discussions were progressed with RCMG about the possibility of a project related to embedded whiteness in museums, and as a route to driving more fundamental, systemic, and sustainable transformation at London Museum. Having worked together previously on the museum's Engagement Framework, strong relationships and an existing level of trust between senior staff at the museum and the Research Centre ensured that the Senior Leadership Team felt confident that the research would be progressed with care and respect, as well as with a rounded understanding of museums, including their histories, complexities, complicities and contradictions. The project took shape in this context of change, and with a Senior Leadership Team ready to open the organisation, its leadership, structures, and processes, up to scrutiny and productive critique.

Action research as a route to inclusive organisational transformation

The project was advanced through a model of action research used in a number of previous RCMG projects. At its most basic, action research enables researchers and research participants to undertake cycles of activity over a specific period of time in order to generate both practical and theoretical insights; research insights and impacts can emerge at any point in the cycle. This cycle of activity is usually described as flowing from identifying the issue or problem through to planning, action, and evaluation, and it involves processes that motivate groups and individuals affected by a specific issue to intervene in complex real-life situations (Waterman et al. 2001). A process through which deep description and understanding of specific social settings can be generated, action research is also focused on change and making improvements through collaboration and participation. At its best, action research can offer empowering learning experiences for researchers and participants alike. Utilizing a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods and advancing change through research and reflection (*ibid.*), in museums, action research can offer a unique, impactful, and research-led route to deep structural change and inclusive organisational transformation.

The RCMG Action Research Model utilizes all of these features and characteristics of action research in that it purposefully couples participation and research with action and change (*ibid.*). In the RCMG model, the notion of 'researcher' is broadened and the distance between museum and university teams is reduced through the creation of a Core Research Group that comprises individuals drawn from both the university and the museum. This group takes shared responsibility for defining, shaping, and driving the research forward, as well as drawing a wide range of experts and participants with both lived and learned expertise – internal and external to the Museum – into the action research process. Central to building trust and momentum, the Core Research Group model also ensures that varied academic, lived, and professional expertise are placed at the heart of the process. In the RCMG Action Research Model, insights arise through: 1) interactions amongst the Core Research Group and the wider range of experts and participants who get involved in the learning and action; 2) the different forms of knowledge – scholarly, professional and lived – that researchers, experts, and research participants bring to bear on the research and which we integrate through a range of choreographed dialogic processes; and 3) the way that the researchers interact with the setting. This third component might involve tuning in to or surfacing ways of talking and being in the museum so that we can begin to reveal the values, assumptions, and

ingrained practices that are shaping the institution, and develop insights that will make sense and feel actionable within that setting. Carving out space for exploration, analysis, reflection, and deep reflexive practice, the Core Research Group and the management and research synthesis processes mean that large groups of people and seemingly disparate actions can be drawn into a larger set of observations for the institution (as well as for the wider sector), whilst also driving incremental organisational change from multiple points across the organisation.

At London Museum, the Core Research Group was formed through an ethically-informed process of open call out to all staff, accompanied by a commitment from RCMG and museum colleagues that staff who feel comfortable in (and benefit from) a white-as-the-norm culture needed to take the weight of the work. The call out stated, 'no specialist knowledge or level of seniority is required here. We are looking for people who can think openly, critically and creatively with us from across the museum'. The group comprised researchers from RCMG and London Museum colleagues who represented a range of museum departments and career stages. The group met approximately once per month for the duration of the project and shaped the research around four main strands of activity.

The 'R' or Research Strand

The first phase of work was described as the 'R' or Research Strand, and was designed to generate the necessary underpinning knowledge and understanding of the scholarship and developments in the museum sector in relation to race equity and museum culture amongst the Core Research Group. Starting with an analysis of race equity frameworks and activity in museums and other organisations internationally, the 'R' Strand also included the production of a series of working papers developed by the RCMG team and in collaboration with expert contributors Subhadra Das, Maxwell Ayamba, and Yasminah Beebeejaun. This process supported the Core Research Group to build shared expertise and understanding of leading-edge thinking and practice that distilled: 1) theoretical insights on whiteness and related concepts from Critical Race Theory; 2) insights from research exploring the ways in which social space upholds inequality, including recent sociological studies of social spaces characterized by cross-cultural interaction; and 3) research related to equitable transformation, race, racism in museums, heritage, and related organisations.

Building on this engagement with underpinning scholarship and thinking and practice in the wider sector, we began to focus in on the organisation through: an analysis of existing London Museum data, policies and reports; interviews with museum staff (all London Museum staff were invited to sign up for these optional interviews); and a series of activities with museum colleagues to review the emergent understanding of working cultures and processes at the museum and to explore individuals' experience of these. Each of these elements were carefully planned. For the interviews, for example, interview protocols were developed to include a series of questions intended to probe interviewees' experiences of working at the museum and their feelings towards the organisation. A diagram setting out the characteristics of a white-as-the-norm museum culture – generated from a bringing together of Jones and Okun's organisational characteristics with examples of testimonies in the museum scholarship – was used within the interviews to talk about whiteness as a form of power, and to enable in-depth conversations by prompting interviewees to reflect on varied aspects of organisational culture (Figure 1). This proved highly productive, with interviews revealing recurring and consistent shared reflections.

At the end of the main phase of 'R' Strand activity, a period of deep analysis was undertaken by the RCMG team and Core Research Group. This part of the process involved drawing together a mass of data, identifying key themes, and generating concise presentations of the rich findings that were then shared across teams and contributors at the museum. The vast amounts of data related to the museum's culture were analysed in relation to scholarship around racism and organisational structure, and proved invaluable in shaping both the 'Development' and 'Action' Strands of the project.

The 'D' or Development Strand

Part way into the work on the 'R' Strand, the team launched the 'D' or 'Development'

Strand. Working in full awareness of the need to generate a deep conversation and a greater understanding across the organisation about whiteness and how it manifests in preparation for the action-centred aspects of the research, this strand of activity rolled out a formal Development Programme for staff that was facilitated by RCMG and organisational transformation agency People Make it Work. Originally envisioned as relatively small-scale and involving representatives from various parts of the museum, including members of the Leadership Team, this plan was revised as both the ambition for the project, and shared understanding of the scale of the work required, grew across the museum and amongst the Core Research Group. Subsequently, the full 30-strong, (then) all-white Leadership Team signed up for the Development Programme in addition to a further group of 15 colleagues drawn from across the organisation.

Between October 2021 and January 2022, three cohorts of 15 people (made up as described above) completed the three-part programme. Content included: detailed analysis of scholarship on whiteness as a form of power; opportunities to reflect on the characteristics of a white-as-the-norm culture, and the ways that these intersected with the insights generated about London Museum; and collaborative work to think together about how all staff at the museum might work to challenge and disrupt deeply-embedded cultural norms and processes. Importantly, the timing of the 'D' Strand meant that the research findings from staff interviews and surveys (including staff experiences of the impacts of embedded whiteness) could be shared in the Development Programme, a feature that proved highly significant and transformative for the majority of participants.

Recognizing that not every member of staff would go through the Development Programme, a shared digital platform gathered up and made available working papers and additional workshop materials to staff across the museum, ensuring that the detailed learning now taking place in the Development Programme and the Core Research Group was also available more widely.

The 'A' or Action Strand

Continuing to analyse data and consolidate insights from the research, the team waited until February 2022 to begin to design and plan for the 'A' or Action Strand. Developed through a highly collaborative process of review of the findings from the 'R' Strand, alongside deep reflection on the learning about the museum, its leadership, structural organisation, culture, and working processes generated in the 'D' strand, the Core Research Group and a focus group of global majority staff from across the organisation (who had become involved in the project through the interview process) identified three key actions. Whilst a much larger group of actions generated through the research to date were converted into a detailed Race Equity Action Plan for the museum, the actions progressed in this phase of the project were identified for their potential to disrupt whiteness and its effects at different levels (and in different ways) at London Museum, and for their potential to generate insights for the wider field into how museums can challenge embedded whiteness and, importantly, where and how whiteness re-emerges in these processes.

The actions that were progressed in 2023 during this phase of the project were: the creation of a clear statement from the Senior Leadership Team to the museum staff on race equity; the development of a simple and usable tool for challenging embedded whiteness in museums that would be shared with and used by all staff across the museum; a creative action to challenge hierarchies in decision-making; and an action exploring how cultural institutions could move beyond training and host – in ways that are sustained, multi-directional, and active – “big conversations” around pressing social issues such as race equity.

The 'S' or Sharing Strand

Finally, the 'S' or Sharing Strand included a process of sharing that would take place throughout the life of the action research project starting within the organisation – sharing new insights and updates with London Museum staff – and gradually transitioning to talking about the research with colleagues across the museum sector in ways that involved a revisiting of data and analysis throughout.

Examples of whiteness at work



Figure 1. A diagram setting out the characteristics of a white-as-the-norm museum culture generated from a bringing together of Jones and Okun's organisational characteristics with examples of testimonies in the museum scholarship was used within the interviews to talk about whiteness as a form of power and to enable in-depth conversations by prompting interviewees to reflect on varied aspects of organisational culture.

Findings and insights from the 'R' and 'D' Strands

Action research generates findings and insights throughout the life of the project, and the work undertaken in the early months of the 'R' Strand built up a detailed sense of both how staff experienced the museum's culture differently depending on their positionality, and how systems and processes – as well as the leadership styles of some managers at the museum – were experienced by many staff as maintaining established power dynamics. The 'R' and 'D' Strands also began to build a shared understanding of where and how whiteness – as a deeply embedded form of power – tended to manifest at London Museum.

How staff understood and experienced the Museum's organisational culture

Whereas for some senior leaders at the museum, the museum was described as working class, left-leaning, and inclusive, many staff described the museum as feeling very middle class. The organisation was understood by a number of staff to be uncomfortable with criticism, and staff described a culture where it could be difficult to share views and discuss different ideas. A number of staff described an organisational culture where difficult topics, including race and racism, were avoided. For many of the Senior Leadership Team, the issue of racism and whiteness was highly uncomfortable. Leaders worried that they would get things wrong and would be criticized for decisions they had made in the past. One participant described the museum culture as a 'silent culture – where things aren't said or expressed – where "you need to fit in" and "understand the norms"...'. '[I]t's not an overtly hostile culture' they continued, 'but it's not one that is used to welcoming people'. Staff across the museum were unsure whether anti-racism work was a priority for the museum. For some, this created a shared sense of frustration and growing misalignment with their personal values. There were feelings of not being able to effect change and speak up. As one white interviewee noted; 'we are more comfortable talking about collections diversity, programming, etc. but much less comfortable turning the lens inward on the museum'. Another white interviewee noted the need to 'break the habit and cycle of avoiding tricky subjects'.

At the time of the initial data gathering in 2021, racially-minoritized research participants

described the culture as unwelcoming and, at times, unpleasant, unsafe, and unsupportive; there was a sense of disillusionment, with work becoming 'less joyful' over time. Racially minoritized staff who were asked to do additional work on race equity on behalf of the museum without adequate resources felt unsupported and taken advantage of. As one interviewee stated: 'I do think this is for white people to do...the people that need to talk about it are white. They are my colleagues. They need to get this. They need to do this. They need to put some [...] time into it. Because I have done it... and lots of other people of colour have too...'. Another global majority staff member in a group session stated: 'I want to see dialogue and action – senior managers hear but they don't do anything about it. It is exhausting for staff to have to keep pushing EDI statements etc. The people who should be doing the work, aren't doing the work. They don't see it as their job'.

Across the data there were repeated requests to know where the Senior Leadership Team stood on issues of institutional racism and race equity work. Discussing the structures and practices of the leadership team, one participant commented: 'we disseminate information, rather than inviting debate and discussion'. Another stated: 'There's something for me around clarity and accountability. There's lots happening – there's this project, there's anti-racist training – but I feel like there's no one holding everything together to try and advance it. Leadership Team have been asked to have EDI objectives but what's it all going towards? There's lots on individual responsibility – "what are YOU doing?" – but nothing that gives it a structure'.

If the research revealed a small but highly aware group of staff who were frustrated with the slow pace of change and lack of discussion at the museum, and a larger group of staff who were committed yet unsure and worried about getting things wrong, it is also important to note that the research also revealed evidence of overt racist attitudes in a very small minority of staff. All these findings were anonymized, and shared with the full Senior Leadership Team as part of the Development Programme in order to: provide the context and need for development; challenge monolithic views of the museum as inclusive, left-leaning and working class; and to generate awareness of the range of views and low levels of awareness and confidence across the staff.

How staff experienced the Museum's management culture and systems

The museum's management culture and systems were also experienced differently by staff. Senior leaders, for example, described a comfortable culture, where they were able to take decisions easily, without them being picked over or challenged. Importantly, this was felt to be unsatisfactory by both senior leaders and wider staff alike. One interviewee described an organisation '[where] decision making is corralled at the top' and a number of participants noted that the boards and groups where decisions were taken often comprise the same people. A lack of systems and processes at middle management to enable change in response to a top-level vision was also noted.

The organisation was repeatedly experienced as lacking in cross-departmental connections, lacking a "can do" attitude, and as being very risk averse. Some staff shared that they found the culture and tone of communication "abrasive", particularly if they made mistakes. Many experienced management approaches and styles as focusing on the completion of specific tasks and processes rather than people and teamwork. Across the museum, bureaucratic processes and management styles were identified as stifling ideas and creativity. As one participant stated: 'the layers of management at [London Museum] stop things happening and sap energy'. Another commented 'there are a lot of gatekeepers of power at the museum. A lot of information doesn't get disseminated throughout the organisation. Heads of department and managers don't share it or don't have time to share it'. Linked to this, the research revealed a suite of internal communication issues and a concomitant lack of opportunity for discussion, which led to staff feeling disempowered. The fast pace of work often meant individuals and teams defaulted to established ways of working to save time. As one member of the museum's Senior Leadership Team stated: 'I need to attend more to the ways in which I sometimes default to my existing networks for recommendations of creative partners / freelancers etc., which are majority white'.

How whiteness (as racialized power) is reproduced in structures, processes and behaviours at London Museum

During the interviews, research participants were shown a powerful graphic which, building on Jones and Okun (2017), as well as a survey of museum scholarship and testimony (including: Bunch 2010: 31; Waterton et al. 2010; Autry 2013: 60; Murawski 2021), set out a range of ways in which whiteness as a form of racialized power, is maintained and manifest in museums (Figure 1). Used as a prompt for discussion, research participants were asked whether they recognized any of the characteristics. Whilst some characteristics did not resonate with participants, many colleagues recognized a significant number of features of a white-as-the-norm organisational culture at play at London Museum:

- An avoidance of talking about and addressing race and racism. Staff who did not experience racism had the ability to choose whether to address it or not, which led staff across the organisation to question whether this was a key issue for the museum or not.
- An expectation that racially-minoritized staff represent their ethnic community or are the ones to raise issues around race.
- A lack of valuing innovative work on advancing equity through the lack of adequate pay, promotions, and permanent positions.
- An institutional culture that is uncomfortable with criticism and can be risk-averse.
- A lack of positive action in recruitment.
- The over-reliance on temporary projects to bring in 'new perspectives'.
- The tendency to rest on prior successes and a lack of will to build on these.

Building on this and drawing across the data, the research team began to identify other features of London Museum's white-as-the-norm culture in which whiteness as a form of power is maintained:

- Change around race equity was slow and did not feel like a priority for the museum.
- The fast pace of work often meant defaulting to established ways of working and established relationships to save time.
- A lack of systems and processes at middle management to enable change.
- Defensiveness – as one participant commented, 'a tendency for staff to say "but we're already doing x, y and z" instead of really listening to what people say and to recognize the need for deep change'.
- Great ideas being knocked back by some senior managers (specifically around questions of race equity).
- Lack of an enabling institutional culture.
- Hierarchical working and a task-based culture – this theme emerged especially strongly across the data.
- Bureaucratic processes and management.
- Low levels of understanding of whiteness as a form of power amongst staff.

- Grand narratives and established ways of talking about the organisational culture (we are “working class” and “left-leaning”) in place of genuine and open discussion about how an inclusive museum culture could be fostered.

- Lack of stated vision and ambition in relation to race equity.

Structures, processes and behaviours that support embedded whiteness at London Museum

- An avoidance of talking about and addressing race and racism – some staff had the ability to choose whether to address it or not.
- An expectation that racially-minoritised staff represent their ethnic community, or are the ones to raise issues around race.
- A lack of valuing innovative work on advancing equity through the lack of adequate pay, promotions and permanent positions.
- An institutional culture that is uncomfortable with criticism and can be risk-averse.
- A lack of positive action in recruitment.
- The over-reliance on temporary projects to bring in 'new perspectives'.
- The tendency to rest on prior successes and a lack of will to build on these.
- Change around race equity is slow and not explicitly stated and planned for as a priority for the museum.
- The fast pace of work often means a default to established ways of working and established relationships to save time.
- A lack of systems and processes at middle management to enable change.
- Defensiveness – as one participant commented, 'a tendency for staff to say “but we're already doing x, y and z” instead of really listening to what people say and to recognise the need for deep change'.
- Great ideas being knocked back by senior managers (specifically around questions of race equity).
- Hierarchical working and a task-based culture – this theme emerged especially strongly across the data.
- Lack of an enabling institutional culture.
- Bureaucratic processes and management.
- Low levels of understanding of whiteness as a form of power amongst staff.
- Grand narratives and established ways of talking about the organisational culture in place of genuine and open discussion about how an inclusive museum culture could be fostered.
- Lack of stated vision and ambition in relation to race equity.

Figure 2: Structures, processes and behaviours that support embedded whiteness at London Museum

Summarized in Figure 2, the identification of structures, processes and behaviours through which whiteness as a form of power is maintained, provides London Museum and museums more broadly with a powerful understanding of where leaders' attention is needed.

Disrupting whiteness at London Museum

From the outset of the project, an important ambition was to design and implement a series of actions that would seek to actively challenge whiteness as a form of power, and to gather insights on both the efficacy and limitations of these interventions, as well as the ways whiteness can re-emerge and take on new forms as attempts to disrupt it are put in place. Building directly on the learning from the 'R' and 'D' phases of the project and generated through a collaborative process of discussion and refinement of the vast array of possible actions generated through the interviews and discussions, a series of specific actions were identified and set in motion.

Action One – Institutional vision and leadership

Recognizing that many staff were asking for clarity of vision around race equity from the Senior Leadership Team – commitment and action that would propel the museum from a reactive mode to one that was active and purposeful around addressing inequities, and would create the conditions for wider institutional change – Action One asked the Senior Leadership Team to co-write a statement setting out the organisational position and ambition in relation to race equity. Perhaps inevitably, given the political climate, institutional nervousness and uneven levels of confidence and awareness surrounding the articulation of an institutional position, the process of crafting and finessing a statement that was approved by all members of the Senior Leadership Team and the Board of Trustees took much longer than originally anticipated, unfolding over a period of several months. Particular challenges emerged around how the presence of systemic or institutional forms of racism within the organisation should and could be articulated. The project had surfaced the importance and ethical value of openness surrounding the presence and enduring harms of institutional racism as a prerequisite for attempts to disrupt white-as-the-norm cultures. At the same time, however, our project was unfolding in the wake of a high-profile report by the UK government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities ('The Sewell Report' 2021), which attracted widespread criticism, primarily for its denial of the significance of structural forms of racism as a root cause of racial inequity. The report fostered a climate in which many organisations were increasingly anxious about discussing, let alone taking steps to dismantle, systemic forms of racism. The Core Research Group gave feedback on early drafts of the statement and, to support the work to move forward, invited external experts Errol Francis (Director of Culture&) and Richard Watts (Director of People Make it Work) to provide additional support for the Senior Leadership Team, and to formulate constructively critical feedback for the whole project team on the draft. The final statement, which acknowledged the presence and impact of structural forms of racism, was issued to all London Museum staff as part of its Race Equity Action Plan in October 2023.

Action Two - Organisational culture

The research findings pointed towards the need for change in the museum's organisational culture to address hierarchical ways of working, as well as entrenched behaviours, systems and processes that stifled, disempowered and prohibited democratic decision making. Drawing across the scholarship, data and discussions, the Core Research Group designed *Challenging Embedded Whiteness: Tool for Culture Change* (Figure 3), which took the form of a series of reflective questions and prompts that teams could use in their everyday practice to facilitate and foster ways of working that could act upon the forms of embedded whiteness revealed in the research. The tool was piloted with six teams – Curatorial, Exhibitions, Estates, Communications and Digital, Learning and Engagement (specifically the anti-racism sharing hub), and the New Museum Content Development team – within the museum, generating learning for the Core Research Group and the museum around how wider take up of the tool could be encouraged across the organisation. Teams reported, for example, ease in applying the tool to new projects where conventions of working practices could be rethought, but also the need for greater support in utilizing the tool to change projects already in progress and to rethink more mundane and everyday tasks. A key challenge for the teams piloting the tool was linked to the absence of an institution-wide awareness of the wider context which the

practical, immediate, and material changes that would support colleagues affected by these experiences at the museum. This was initially imagined by the Core Research Group as a series of “positive action” interventions that could, for example, help global majority staff to progress their careers. However, after researchers met with members of the Beacon Collective – the (then) museum’s internal network for global majority staff – to explore together which measures would be most valuable and significant, the group made it clear that they would want to prioritize a focus on interventions to disrupt the organisational cultural norms, power dynamics, and hierarchical structures within which staff operated. Two actions were subsequently taken forward under Action Three. The first of these set out to support the museum to foster a more open, critical, and reflective approach to internal discussion and debate. The co-produced action was designed to support the museum to initiate, hold, and (importantly) sustain “big conversations” (including about race equity) in which all staff might be empowered to participate, critically reflect, and be inspired to make change. A process was co-created for proposing and supporting large-scale, issues-based discussions across teams and as part of the day-to-day work of the museum.

The second action set out specifically to address the perception, strongly evidenced in the research findings, that decision making was concentrated at the top of the organisation and amongst a relatively small number of people, and then filtered down in the form of tasks and directions. This experimental action focused on how a key decision-making forum in the museum could be reconfigured in multiple ways: new membership; fresh ways of inviting input, especially from staff who are most directly affected by decisions but who rarely get a say in them; greater transparency around the ways decisions are made, and so on. The Docklands Programming Board was identified as a group in the museum where some of the seeds of these changes were already underway, and where it would be possible to empower the group members to drive change and ultimately share new models of working across wider teams. As the reflections make clear below, such an approach demands a clear directive from the very top of the organisation.

Reflections and challenges

Unpacking forms of racism, power, and whiteness within our lives, experiences and institutions can be a difficult and uncomfortable process on many levels. Drawing on learning from the project, the final part of this paper offers a number of reflections and surfaces the challenges of working in this area. We reflect on the concept of whiteness itself as a tool for examining forms of racialized power, the need to develop trust and prioritize care in the process, and how the work can be productively and effectively supported and sustained within organisations.

Whiteness as a concept

Whiteness as a concept seeks to describe both a form of power that has evolved over a long history *and* a contemporary experience whereby some people benefit from an invisible form of privilege which, depending on their relationship to structures of inequality – racism and white supremacy, ableism, classism, sexism – will be experienced in very different ways. Whiteness describes the structural inequalities that are built into society – the systems and norms that are prioritized and which generate deep inequalities for those perceived to fall outside of those systems and norms. Whiteness also exists at the level of interpersonal relations, generating an often deeply invisible form of othering which plays out in everyday interactions and microaggressions. In this sense, the term is doing a lot of heavy conceptual lifting, describing a social construct and an invisible form of power that operates through every aspect of society and plays out differently for different people depending on their identity and lived experience. As discussions with London Museum staff illustrated, the enormity of whiteness as a concept means that it can feel abstract, hard to grasp, and difficult to utilize. It is also a concept that can be perceived as challenging or divisive; as Gary Younge (2012: 109) has noted, concepts such as whiteness often take little account of economic difference, with white working-class people ‘told their whiteness is a mark of power they have never felt and a signifier for potential bigotry they may not harbour’. It asks those who do not experience racism to turn the gaze on themselves and ask confronting questions not just about the

characteristics of a white-as-the-norm culture, but about the assumptions we all make and the ways in which we each work to shore up this form of oppressive power. It asks us to think about race and racism in ways that we most likely have never had to do before, and it asks us to change our underpinning assumptions and behaviours. As the work with staff across London Museum revealed, this can feel deeply unsettling. All of these factors mean that maintaining a focus on whiteness is not always straightforward or welcomed.

Whiteness is also a significant and helpful concept as it draws attention to a very real form of power and advantage that is rarely talked about in cultural institutions, and even more rarely specified. It insists that people who may never have had to think about race and racism, become aware of a form of power that is continually in play, shaping perceptions, affecting behaviours, and defining experiences. The breadth and expansiveness of the concept means that it can be put to work in ways that take full account of the intersecting nature of structures of inequality, and the way that inequality plays out in human experience. In contrast to a recent report which advocates the avoidance of challenging concepts (Stears et al. 2023), our research suggests that – when approached in an action research frame, as part of a careful, supportive, and challenging training and development process, and in ways that draw new understandings of whiteness into direct relationship with the everyday work of teams and individuals – a close, specific, and sustained focus on whiteness can drive deep reflexivity and generate levels of understanding of our relations to others, and empathy with the experiences of those around us of great power and transformative potential. Fundamentally, it is this level of reflexivity – across all teams and individual staff members – that is required to move beyond the more familiar diversity discourse and prepare the ground for the structural change required to enable anti-racist practices to flourish. Challenging and at times fraught, as teams and individuals moved through some of the manifestations of whiteness – such as a tendency to defensiveness or lack of acknowledgement of the significance and relevance of the issues raised – and recognising the very human and understandable need for time to gain conceptual clarity, the project made clear that a sustained, open, critical, and facilitated focus on whiteness can lead to an overall deepening of the collective emotional intelligence of senior leaders and organisations as a whole, and prepare the ground for structural change. It demands that we move beyond the diversity discourse – itself a form of othering – and begin to imagine and create together the structures and processes that will destabilize a white-as-the-norm culture and open up new relations and possibilities for experience.

Building involvement, trust and an ethics of care

Generating deep, honest, and open discussions around whiteness in museums and amongst teams raises significant ethical considerations around the impact of those discussions on all staff, but particularly on colleagues of colour. Throughout, the Core Research Group thought deeply about what they were asking of colleagues, and how they could ensure that the involvement of global majority staff was genuinely voluntary and driven by confidence in the project. The need for museum staff and researchers who do not experience racism to lead on and take the weight of the work was agreed amongst the research team from the outset and re-established by global majority research participants as a challenge to the Core Research Group at various points throughout the research. The challenge was willingly taken up by both London Museum staff and RCMG researchers.

Throughout, the Core Research Group and the level of collaboration generated by the group internally and across the museum, played a significant role in building trust and a feeling of safety for research participants. Core Research Group meetings were characterized by long and open conversations and sharing in response to research findings alongside structured activities, for example, converting research findings into concrete plans and activities. Facilitation of these sessions was careful and paced, purposefully holding the space to enable team members to listen, share, and reflect, and to build trust in the RCMG team and amongst the London Museum team. This approach enabled colleagues to share frustrations and feelings that are not typically allowed or enabled in the workplace. The modelling of what it really means to listen without judgement, and without leaping in to “solve the problem” meant that everything took longer; meetings were often draining, particularly

for global majority colleagues, and there was often a need to check in with group members afterwards. Evidence of the time needed to build trust was also evident in the wider project. Initial take-up of interviews by colleagues was slow. However, as the Core Research Group began to deliver talks and share findings across the organisation, and as word spread about the careful approach taken in the interviews and the opportunities to impact the research that they afforded, colleagues gradually signed up to share their experiences of the museum.

Whilst specific sessions and interviews were planned in detail and were always facilitated in ways which prioritized an ethics of care, inevitably (and despite best intentions to ensure that global majority colleagues were not doing the heavy lifting on the project) the input of global majority colleagues – within the Core Research Group, in the interviews, on the Development Programme and in focus groups – were undoubtedly of great significance. Whilst focused on whiteness as a form of power, and on the structures, processes, perceptions, and behaviours that maintain whiteness, the research continually generated and relied upon insights into the experiences of staff who experience racism. As staff signed up for interviews and fed in through surveys, stories of microaggressions, lack of opportunity and support, and feelings of discomfort within the organisational culture continually surfaced and deepened the research, providing concrete examples of whiteness at work and its debilitating impact on individuals and the effectiveness of the organisation. Often, in Core Research Group meetings, it took the reflections and insights of global majority colleagues to push discussions and planning to really useful places; in these moments global majority colleagues brought whiteness into relief – pushing it from the shadows into open view.

As the work continued, the tension between, on the one hand, the deep understanding that colleagues racialized as white needed to lead on and take responsibility for this work, and, on the other, that global majority colleagues were central to the work, grew. To understand, identify, and establish the organisational drive to challenge embedded whiteness in museums demands a whole team approach. We also became aware however, of the presence of temptation at these points to “solve the problem” – global majority colleagues who participated and shared their experiences in the project understood whiteness only too well, but the aim of supporting colleagues racialized as white to understand and start to identify whiteness – both practically and ethically – needs to come from a far deeper, ongoing, process of learning and reflection if we are to move beyond training and development to the urgency for change. There is, then, an art in (1): living up to the commitment for colleagues who have not had to think about race and racism before to lead and maintain this work and take the burden of it whilst, (2): simultaneously seeking support and, where welcomed, involvement from global majority colleagues, and (3): practising the discipline of continually turning the collective gaze back to whiteness and the features of the white-as-the-norm culture that need naming and challenging.

Recognizing where power was reasserted – learning to see and challenge whiteness

Advancing Equity: Challenging Embedded Whiteness was funded by London Museum, with additional funding via the Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account. It was supported from the very top of the organisation, and the full Senior Leadership Team worked through the Development Programme. As momentum built, more and more London Museum staff signed up for interviews and to get involved in the research; ultimately, around 80 staff participated through the project. The museum was eager to respond to insights from the research as it progressed and, part way through, the incredibly full list of workable actions to challenge embedded whiteness that were crowdsourced through the Development Programme, interviews, Q&A sessions and so on, were drawn into a Race Equity Action Plan for the museum. All of this was evidence of deep commitment to the research ambition of understanding, identifying, and challenging embedded whiteness at London Museum.

Despite this commitment, some of the most challenging and also insightful moments in the research process were when the manifestations of whiteness identified in the research were reasserted. This was particularly evident in the Action Strand, but could also be identified at different points throughout. Whether this was specific team leaders not making

time to support teams to utilize the *Tool for Culture Change* together (Action Two), colleagues identified as changemakers feeling overwhelmed by the seeming intractability and opacity of organisational processes, conventions, and hierarchies, or apathetic about whiteness or the level of change they could affect (Action Three), or a more subtle hardening of responses from individual members of the Senior Leadership Team, these moments were carefully observed. Such examples were revealing of how change will be stifled – intentionally and unintentionally – in multiple ways and at multiple levels of the organisation, and how hard it is for individual, committed members of staff to speak up and challenge the reassertion of established practices within a hierarchical structure. As other researchers have found (Ahmed 2007; Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022; Doharty et al. 2021), this work can be hampered by responses and actions that run counter to the carefully crafted and open ways of working established by the Core Research Group and work to prop up whiteness.

These moments were also revealing of the complexity of big institutions and the differing priorities of different groups – the advice from lawyers to the board of trustees and the priorities of boards, for example, may not be driven by ethics or scholarship or the desire to be anti-racist, but by mitigation of perceived risk. Far from straightforward, these moments in the research opened all our eyes to the varying responsibilities of senior leaders, the need to involve senior teams and boards of trustees (however difficult the process is to get to that point) in shaping and driving anti-racist practice, and the need for formal targets and clearly stated expectations for change.

In these moments, some of which were resolved productively through constructive dialogue and sustained commitment, the team became incredibly aware of the complex mix of ingredients required to maintain a focus on embedded whiteness. This included an action research frame, with its focus on research and participation, action, and change; a development programme, with its emphasis on learning and ongoing discussion of whiteness; access to and increased awareness amongst all staff of the full picture of the organisational culture in all its messiness; the impact of whiteness on individuals, and the realities of organisational capability in relation race equity; a strong sense of leadership and statement of purpose from the leadership and, importantly, trustees; and a framework for progress and accountability.

Conclusion

Advancing Equity: Challenging Embedded Whiteness set out to understand, identify, and challenge embedded whiteness in museums. The project coupled research and participation with action and change in a process focused on generating both practical outcomes for a single institution and scholarly insights for the wider academic and professional sectors. As the descriptions and discussions above reveal, the research generated deep insights into the culture at London Museum and the way this is experienced differently by different people depending upon their relations to varied forms of inequality, challenging the assumptions of museum leaders. Building on existing scholarship on whiteness and drawing evidence from the wider museum studies scholarship, the Core Research Group was able to identify a series of characteristics of “white-as-the-norm” museum cultures as set out in Figure 1. For London Museum staff this proved incredibly useful, providing a mechanism for comparison to their specific experiences, and identifying the structures, processes, and behaviours that shore up whiteness at London Museum (Figure 2).

The research also generated other kinds of outcomes at different stages of the process, ranging from clarity around the concept of whiteness to realization of the range of views and low levels of awareness, knowledge and confidence around race equity amongst London Museum staff. The research team learned a great deal about organisational change in relation to race equity and the disparities between the public statements that museums make about their values-driven work, and the realities and (sometimes) limits of intellectual and emotional capacity in museum teams. In terms of levels of institutional understanding of inequality, race equity, and embedded whiteness at London Museum, these were very low. A finding that would undoubtedly be echoed across other major museums, it was nonetheless revealing to evidence this at a museum with a long history of inclusive programming and project work. Confirming critiques of the diversity discourse and the lack of fundamental systemic change,

the research opened up a far deeper awareness of the levels of organisational reflection, change, and staff development and reflexivity required to challenge embedded whiteness and claim to be undertaking anti-racist practice.

Most obviously, the research prepared the ground for change at the museum by delivering a cohort of 45 staff with expertise in the concept of whiteness, the history that gave birth to whiteness as a form of power, and the way in which the concept of whiteness as a form of power can be utilized to draw attention to the ongoing legacies of racism. It delivered a mass of policy and practical ideas, crowd-sourced through the process, to address the power imbalances and sometimes lack of awareness and care at the museum, which were worked through and into a Race Equity Action Plan.¹⁴ The research also delivered, in its final phase, *Challenging Embedded Whiteness: A Tool for Culture Change* (Figure 3), a device for everyday thinking and action that could prompt all staff, whatever their role in the museum, to question their own assumptions, challenge organisational practices, and drive anti-racist practices into their day-to-day work.

If the research generated insights into the potential of the concept of whiteness to drive significant levels of organisational and individual reflection, and delivered knowledge and tools to enable very real change, it also raised very significant and difficult questions about how far the transformative potential of working with the big ideas of whiteness can go as they are drawn and translated into the language, systems, and familiar ways of working in museums. At what point does the work succumb to the drive for “business as usual”, the apathy of overworked or unaware museum professionals, the risk averse attitude of boards of trustees, and unfortunately the privilege and power of a minority of individuals who may not agree with the need for change? How do we keep the accountability and the analytical and emotional power of peoples’ engagements with whiteness as this happens? The research pointed very clearly to the need for confidence and bravery around this work, and for senior teams, including boards of trustees, to increase their capacity to deal with complexity and criticism, and to work through the challenges to prioritize – front and centre and in their ongoing, day-to-day work – the active and transformational work of facing up to whiteness and, utilizing an action research framework, maintaining their focus and commitment to structural change.

Postscript

London Museum continues to progress its race equity work in full awareness that it has a long way to go. The Race Equity Action Plan went live in October 2023 and supports internal work as part of the museum’s broader Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy.¹⁵ Incremental changes mean that the Senior Leadership Team is now representative of a wider range of experiences – as of April 2025, 16 per cent were from a global majority background – and monitoring is in place to ensure that progress is both maintained and transparent. In October 2024 the museum launched a Race Equity Advisory Group to provide external scrutiny, challenge, and offer critical advice on the museum’s current and future anti-racism approaches and plans. London Museum’s Strategic Plan for 2023–2028 situates the Tool for Culture Change as part of the wider work of the museum over the coming years.

Notes

- ¹ In June 2021, 0 per cent of London Museum’s Senior Leadership Team were from a Global Majority background. This had increased to 16% by January 2025.
- ² The research was subject to an ethics application to the University of Leicester and received full ethical approval on 27 May 2021.
- ³ From the outset, the research team recognized the changing currency, limitations and potential harms of racial grouping terms which rarely reflect the realities and complexities of people’s lives and identities. In the context of this research, we use a small number of grouping terms to help convey the research findings whilst also recognising that these terms are always limiting and imprecise and that language preferences will change.

- 4 Dismantling Racism, 'Racism defined', Dismantling Racism Workbook 2017. <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/racism-defined.html>.
- 5 Nicola Rollock and David Gillborn, 'Critical Race Theory (CRT), British Educational Research Association online resource', BERA 2011. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/critical-race-theory-crt>, accessed 21 February 2021.
- 6 Over this time, a number of authors have drawn attention to the chronic issues of under-representation in the museum and related sectors, in terms of both visitors and workforce, and the structural and cultural barriers to change (see for example: Arts Council England 2019, 2022; Art Fund 2022; Desai and Thomas 1998: 21, 53; Brook et al. 2018, 2020; Littler and Naidoo 2005: 13; Museums Association 2016, 2020; Nexas 2024).
- 7 Errol Francis, 'Reflections on Black Lives Matter, Decolonisation and What Museums Can Do Next'. Culture& Latest News blog 2021. <https://www.cultureand.org/news/reflections-on-black-lives-matter-decolonisation-and-what-museums-can-do-next-dr-errol-francis/>, accessed 4 February 2025.
- 8 Geraldine Kendall Adams, 'Our response to the DCMS contested heritage meeting on 23 February - Museums Association' <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/our-response-to-the-dcms-contested-heritage-meeting/>, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 9 Fraser Nelson, 'Kemi Badenoch: The Problem with Critical Race Theory', *The Spectator*, 24 October 2020. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/kemi-badenoch-the-problem-with-critical-race-theory/>, accessed 7 January 2025; Daniel Trilling 'Why is the UK government suddenly targeting "critical race theory"?', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/23/uk-critical-race-theory-trump-conservatives-structural-inequality>, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 10 Calvin Robinson, 'Time to End the Teaching of Divisive Critical Race Theory in British Schools', *The Telegraph*, 21 October 2020. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/10/21/time-end-teaching-divisive-critical-race-theory-british-schools/>, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 11 See also Daniel Trilling 'Why is the UK government suddenly targeting "critical race theory"?', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/23/uk-critical-race-theory-trump-conservatives-structural-inequality>, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 12 Kenneth Jones and Tema Okum, cited in MASS Action (Museum As Site for Social Action) Toolkit, https://inclusion.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/df17e-toolkit_10_2017.pdf, pp. 203-207.
- 13 Anon, 'Barbican Stories: Everything you need to know about the Barbican', https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60aa3e5fd20de56185608cf1/t/640644ec5352385310c092d8/1678132832015/BarbicanStories_June2021_2021, accessed 7 January 2025.
- 14 In recognition of the quality of data gathered through the process, and as part of a follow-on project, the fuller 'long list' of actions was simultaneously developed into a Race Equity Action Plan for the Museum of London, drawing on external expertise from key members of the Core Research Group, organisational change experts, People Make it Work, and RCMG.
- 15 See <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/about/careers/culture-values/>.

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