

White Materialities

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The papers in this special issue of *Museum & Society* examine the fabrication and effects of whiteness – a form of power built from the assumption and “science” of white supremacy that flourished with European empires – as an ongoing force within our museums and heritage spaces. Whiteness emerges from, and upholds, colonial-racial logics in ways rendered so natural that these logics and intentions are concealed through discourses of human progression, saviourism, preservation and benevolence. Alongside other public institutions, museums continue to operate in this logic, simultaneously acting as sites of coloniality and possession while mediating our inheritance of loss. Rousell and Hussey-Smith (2024) describe museums as spaces which normalize white privilege and superiority, while claiming ‘innocence, neutrality, and common ownership’. Though assertive, celebratory whitenesses exist in museums (Hahn 2025); whiteness, as a form of racialized power, frequently operates through a masking of intentions. This special issue offers new scholarship that contributes to the unmasking, materializing, and challenging of whiteness in the museum. The impetus for this collection emerged collectively from a discussion in 2023 between a group of established UK-based experts on race and whiteness – Sara Wajid, Nirmal Puwar, Catherine Hahn, Rachael Minott and Katy Bunning. The ambition for this special issue was to support and generate new research and scholarship on this critical subject, and to create a platform to reassert long-standing calls for institutional and sectoral change.

What Françoise Vergès refers to as a “disordering” of the museum (2024) has been taking shape for many years across the heritage sector in the UK, most often through the skilful and dedicated work of colleagues who reflect on their own experiences, exclusions, investments, and norms across the sector. The authors in this special issue build on the significant work of international practitioners and scholars who have surfaced forms of whiteness and racialized power through writing, experimentation, and practice. Looking specifically at the contemporary museum as a site for research, the papers closely examine the racial dynamics of museums, and how whiteness is produced through exhibition galleries, collections, interpretive text, projects, community partnerships, institutional policies, and workplace cultures. While not exhaustive in scope, these papers intend to offer a stimulus for our collective learning about the material effects and affects of whiteness and, crucially, offer tangible and research-led approaches to addressing them.

White materialities abound; they are lasting legacies, folded into the bricks, mortar, soil and plant infrastructures of empire making. White materialities are economic entities, evaded and reproduced by institutions. White materialities live in objects and technologies all around us, as well as those sitting in storerooms and archives. White materialities are relationality, intermeshed and woven with variegated relations of inequality; they are embodied in class, “race”, gender, ableism, caste, and sexualities. White materialities continue to be reproduced and fabricated through different carriers, through access to clean air, and spaces to breathe – both physiological and social-psychic. For those who think they cannot identify whiteness and that it is too nebulous to locate and study, we can turn to Toni Morrison who, in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), describes the structure of whiteness as akin to the invisible bowl in which a goldfish swims. The invisibility of whiteness, the right to just be, is a key symptomatic material manifestation, as pointed out by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract* (1997). Whiteness functions as an invisible point to speak from a universal thinker, predicated on who becomes historically and conceptually personified as a human generalist. Universal thinkers and universal museums are threaded with the legacies of whiteness and empire

making (Vergès 2024).

As situated and evolving, white materialities surface in particular and peculiar ways in the contemporary British heritage and museum context. The papers in this volume each seek to grapple with and place on the page the often “unseen” or “unacknowledged” spectre of race as a form of power in a system that largely confines questions of race to the experiences of racialized non-white minorities. The amplification of black and brown bodies, singular individuals through patronization, the predictable ethnicized aesthetics and tilted modes of consultation, and the unquestioned professionalized modes of interpretation, exchange, and collaboration, operate alongside longstanding categorizations, valourizations, and pigeon-holed placements and practices. A somatic norm materializes the constitution and fabrication of the museum (Hahn, 2025; McGuirk 2025; Puwar 2004). This contribution reflexively focuses on the role of majority-white professional cultures in the production of whiteness, recognizing the multiple agents involved in its reproduction. Here, and in the wake of decades of scholarship on critical whiteness and institutional racism, and – particularly framed for those less engaged in anti-racism work – this introductory paper presents a set of three coordinates that insist we must begin, and continue, to create the conditions for activating this established and evolving knowledge:

- normalize the need for radical change
- unpack whiteness at work
- disinvest from investments in whiteness

Each coordinate is explored here, and through the collection of papers that follow. Rather than presuming to define the pillars of the work to decentre whiteness – work that by its very nature is to be determined and shaped by forces that embody the rights of self-definition and self-determination – our intention is to crystallize some empowering and fundamental imperatives at a moment of deep calls for sectoral change, and to intervene in the field of museum studies, where the properties of whiteness are repeatedly where constructions of Otherness abound.

The stakes are high. As this collection goes to press, a nationalistic manifestation of whiteness as an exclusion zone is materializing through English and British flags being raised across the UK. Flags are flown high on street poles, and on side railings and roadways, whilst zebra crossings are painted with red lines for St George. The right to space and exclusive definitions of Englishness are taking on a resurgence in public environments and private gardens. These conceptions claim a specific notion of Englishness, a demarcation through material manifestations. These symbolic gestures are also supported by the materiality of words (Motamedi Fraser 2015), which carry the affective choreographies of heritage definitions through border-making political rhetoric in politics. The erasure of history and the amnesia of global connectedness (Hall 2001) is perpetuated in the exclusive materialization of heritage through these claims. Our contemporary moment underscores the urgency of confronting and disrupting whiteness and its exclusions.

Normalize the need for radical change

Whiteness must be reckoned with. Museums in the UK are facing mounting evidence that inequalities and structural barriers to diversifying the sector – namely audiences, workforce and leadership – persist, repeat, and multiply despite decades of initiatives.¹ To open up our institutions, we need to reimagine the structures in which museums operate, redefine the measures of success, and challenge the unchallenged norms that reproduce a legacy of white-supremacist thinking. We need to liberate culture, heritage, and education from the logics of historical colonialism, and find routes to divesting from the culture of exploitation and ongoing forms of coloniality that are tied into our capitalist economic system.

Sustainable and ethical practices are needed. Many of our museums and galleries in the UK remain deeply classist, ableist, heteronormative, and racializing spaces that continue to normalize white supremacy. While powerful and critical interventions, inclusive

programming, and diversity initiatives that create only the illusion of structural change are increasingly recognized as keeping the regime of cultural exploitation and whiteness intact (Monbaron 2024). Yet contestations are ablaze across the sector. Whether sanctioned or otherwise, people use museums – their collections, their resources, and their spaces – in a myriad of ways as routes to self-definition, collective empowerment, and critical inquiry. Museum visitors and co-workers humanize the experience of the museum, and partnerships emerge that seek to redesign such spaces as unique sites of recognition, healing and care. Disengagement from the museum is also a force at play. Many of those who are minoritized by these compromised institutions purposefully reject ongoing participation in the museum – as visitors, workers, or collaborators – and seek spaces of culture and employment that are experienced as less racializing and harmful. The museum, originally intended as a bastion of coloniality and perpetual whiteness, is rendered without worth and without power in these moments.

While there is ambition within pockets of the workforce towards a radically redefined museum, and a critical mass of activists, scholars, and educators beyond the museum, it remains that the social and institutional conditions required to collectively redesign our culture and heritage spaces are fundamentally lacking. Ultimately, those who preside at the top of our public institutions tend to view radical change as unfavourable to the continuation of their own, and their institution's, success. Our museums and galleries ultimately serve an entrenched economic and social order, and uphold a political vision of our nation that relies on established ideals of stability and cohesion and elevated whitenesses (Hahn 2025). Ideologically, our national museums and galleries are nurtured as liberal and progressive spaces that can serve changing interests, but they are not encouraged to be centres of radical risk taking, nor revolutionary forces that might overthrow the colonial-capitalist logics that underpin our contemporary system. Swathes of the political elite, local officials, and museum and culture professionals alike subscribe to this largely conservative view, as a way of ensuring ongoing legitimacy and security in the current social order. The systemic ridiculing of radical politics by the elite spills down into local ridicule of radical ideas within organisations that rely on the need to communicate their value and success not simply with their publics but with their funders and governments. Radical changes that overtly disinvest from the forces of whiteness will not come from within the established museum.

As events of the twentieth century have shown, collective social movements that swell at the grassroots and seek to redefine the logics of our society do have the power to shift the contours of the status quo. Social movements can fundamentally and permanently destabilize the narratives of legitimacy and shift the measures of success that our institutions rely on, creating openings for change. In the UK, influential local and global movements such as “history from below”, decolonize education, and Black Lives Matter have collectively shifted the ethical landscape within which museums can conceive of their roles and purpose. Human rights work and socially engaged activist practices that permeate our museums today emerge from, and were made possible by, collective external forces that made a lack of change unethical and unviable (Sandell 2017). Our first call to action is to normalize the need for deep reflexive change and paradigm shifts in the museum as an ethical imperative. Engaging with collective social movements beyond the museum connects us to forces that have a unique power to redefine our social institutions.

Unpack whiteness at work

Reproductions of whiteness that operate in the workplace and in our museums and heritage spaces need to be systematically identified and addressed. UK museum professionals are, broadly speaking, still deeply uncomfortable with talking about race, and lack familiarity with the mechanisms of racialization. Many cite a lack of confidence, a lack of willingness, and crucially, the power and resources, to tackle institutional structures that sustain racialized power dynamics in the sector (Bunning 2024). Despite the influence of postcolonial theory in the arts and humanities, and a wealth of research on institutional racism and societal inequalities, it remains possible to build a successful and celebrated career in the sector without reference to, or action on, the legacies and ongoing productions of white supremacy. Issues of race and

colonialism are often understood as synonymous with the need for greater black presence, while the root causes of anti-black racism – namely white supremacy and the production of ongoing forms of whiteness – are chronically overlooked.

While many UK museums have made commitments to diversity and changing practice, institutions simultaneously work to shore up white heritage narrations (Hahn 2023, 2025). This trend is exemplified in London by blockbuster dead white artist exhibitions (such as those showing Turner, Constable and Picasso), rejuvenated rehangs of historic painting displays (at Tate Britain and The Courtauld), and white patrons being centred in hitherto more mobile spaces (Hans Sloane in the Enlightenment Gallery at the British Museum). The re-entrenchment of whiteness makes troubling associations post-Brexit, with a nostalgia for empire, a rise in overt white supremacy, xenophobia, and patriarchal nationalism (Agius et al. 2020).² In this white-focussed context, diversifying revisions risk functioning as ‘sop or plaster’ (Littler, 2005), and reifying established power (Reilly 2018: 23-7) by performing as the alterity ‘anchored to what they are seen to embody’ (Puwar 2004: 72). The doubling-down on whiteness in museums has made work to undo racism harder, as those seeking change are continually battling against its renewal.

Janet Couloute’s paper in this issue responds to the ongoing failure of historical and curatorial practitioners to engage on racial terms with the history and heritage of whiteness. Couloute expounds this critique through an analysis of whiteness in Early Modern portraiture and intervenes in race-neutral curatorial interpretations that work to prevent an engagement with our nation’s deeply racial histories. Couloute deftly couples her analysis of collections and practices with personal experiences of exclusion in the sector, highlighting the specific behaviours and attitudes that maintain the boundaries of belonging, and which constitute whiteness at work. Couloute calls on museum and gallery practitioners to illuminate whiteness as a ‘deliberate construct and a tangible reality’ that pervades our history and heritage.

Placing the production of structural racism in its broader political context, **Churnjeet Mahn, David Murphy, and Arunima Bhattacharya** highlight a wealth of leading-edge work over the last decade to surface the ongoing presence of white supremacy in museums. Examining the distinct cultural and policy landscape of museums in Scotland, and focusing on a series of celebrated initiatives to unmask whiteness within the sector, the authors ask why ‘systematic approaches’ to understanding race and whiteness nevertheless ‘fail to stick’ in cultural and institutional life. Offering that “white thinking” is ‘a protean set of practices’ that shift form in order to sustain the boundaries of whiteness, the paper highlights the evolving national narratives and existing structures that not only prevent meaningful institutional change, but also contribute to harmful racial dynamics for participants involved at a local level.

The concept of whiteness is one that many (including some experienced anti-racism professionals) have moved away from. When read as the problematizing of white identity or ethnicity, the concept can generate defensiveness, and elicit claims of racism and divisiveness. Research at London Museum between 2020 and 2023 with the University of Leicester sought to hold a critical space for this concept as part of an action research project that shifted the lens of anti-racism work towards a forensic look at the institutional norms and cultures of the everyday museum. As **Katy Bunning, Suzanne MacLeod and Richard Sandell’s** paper in this issue shows, the concept of whiteness can work as a critical and productive lens that erodes the perceived distance between white museum professionals and anti-racism work. This paper offers a deep institution-focused case study of how an organisation can address a “white-as-the-norm” organisational culture through redesigning policies and practices, but also shows how whiteness – the status quo – re-asserts itself at key moments through a range of behaviours, decisions, and structures that delimit the possibilities for inclusive organisational change. The authors underscore the need for senior teams, trustees, and wider staff to ‘increase their capacity to deal with complexity and criticism’, and to work to maintain their focus on the necessity of structural change if they are to claim an anti-racist practice.

Drawing on autoethnography and exhibition analysis, **Erin O’Brien** characterizes the racial dynamics of the “white museum space”, and dissects the artistic and curatorial strategies – such as marking whiteness and unmarking difference – that can productively challenge the silence of whiteness. Focusing on two exhibitions, *Genetic Automata* (2024) at the Wellcome Collection and the Migration Museum’s touring exhibition *Heart of the Nation: Migration and*

the Making of the NHS (2023), and drawing on an established critique of “diversity” work, O’Brien identifies the possibilities of disrupting the reinscribing logics of colonialist extraction and harm in the compromised space of the museum.

Disinvest from investments in whiteness

The papers in this special issue are written by people with different and complex relationships to, and investments in whiteness. Whiteness is not a fixed point on a frozen latitude in institutions or inter-personal relations. Museum theorists and professionals in this special issue explore how attempts by whites to disinvest from whiteness in museums have had varying results. How whiteness entails grappling with white power, alongside successes, setbacks, and failures, is unpacked. Their practice illuminates the critical need for anti-racist museum work from an awareness of the weight of whiteness, whilst concurrently flagging issues and concerns, with their ongoing centred roles.

Understanding whiteness in the sector, and in the myriad ways it materializes, involves ongoing practices that can offer ethical orientations in re-thinking institutional relationships. Addressing whiteness in workplaces is critical to co-building future designs of what a museum can be. Centring the groundings of whiteness, which has the power to be invisible, offers a new commoning of what a museum can be. There are many ways to rumble inside the belly of the beast. Whites, as Richard Dyer (1997) points out, continue to be the universal speaking ghosts of modernity, including in museums. A reflexive inquiry of differentials in proximities to whiteness, requires considerations to the hierarchical conditions of possibility and impossibility in institutions (Bourdieu 1993). We must value ongoing critique and encourage deeper conversations about whiteness and intersecting forms of privilege and power (Frankenberg 1993; Ware 2015). This work is already underway, and colleagues who are marginalized within the sector are at the forefront of leading-edge practice in this regard. Divesting from whiteness requires a deep-dive inquiry of the investments in whiteness (Hage 1998).

Rob Lewis and Julian Walker’s paper in this issue takes the form of a published conversation that reflects on the deeply emotional and personal work of coming to understand whiteness as it manifests in themselves within the context of contemporary museum practices. The conversation reflects on the materialities of unearned advantages in a system designed to benefit educated white professionals, and explores the liberatory possibilities of anti-racism for those that benefit from the system. The conversation also explores the ease of falling into apathy and inaction, and the importance of connecting personally and emotionally with our ongoing crisis of unexamined whiteness.

Underscoring the need for vulnerability and trust, **Rosie Motion** offers a reading of reflective accounts of a major community-led project and exhibition in Suffolk, England that ran between 2019 and 2021. Motion’s analysis identifies the different forces simultaneously at play in such work, and how the project was experienced as both empowering and oppressive for those involved. Drawing on participant interviews and evaluation, Motion charts the context, experience and aftermath of this transformative intervention, and how two museum project leads – both white women – reflect on their failures and learning throughout the process. Reading the project through the lens of white fragility, Motion summarizes the need for humility and openness in the pursuit of community focused work, and to anticipate the ways in which an imbalance of power and ongoing forms of racialization impact the work at the very outset.

Reviewing a book by Susan Ashley and Degna Stone (2023) that returns to Stuart Hall’s seminal keynote speech ‘Whose Heritage?’, **Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp** characterizes manifestations of whiteness as “ethical impatience”; a desire to tackle systemic issues without an informed understanding of their “historical and institutional roots”. Examining the tensions of anti-racism work in practice, Zetterstrom-Sharp concludes with the need to challenge our institutional starting points, and begin instead with what is happening “outside of and despite” museums.

Reflections and acknowledgements

The papers in this special issue were developed and written at a time of uncertainty and challenge in the culture and higher education sectors, and in our social lives, with cuts,

restructures, and instabilities hampering our ability to contribute and flourish in this work. Many of those involved in writing and producing this edition of *Museum & Society* were, or became, unwaged during the process, or were working within a context of precarity; a context that inevitably emerges from the growing inequalities and economic logics of our social and professional contexts.

The special issue itself materializes the structural exclusions of the academy. The extractive norms of research and publishing, the accessibility of resources, and the emotional labour of writing about race each reared up in the process of producing this work. The publication project thus resurfaces ongoing challenges around how to operate ethically within a system that so often demands particular ways of working, knowing, and being within a climate of chronic overwork. Creative and subversive models of practice that insist on rejecting or dismantling these hierarchies and exclusions must be both amplified and normalized.

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Notes

- ¹ Art Fund, ‘“It’s About Handing Over Power”: The Impact of Ethnic Diversity Initiatives on Curatorial Roles in the UK Arts & Heritage Sector 1998–2021’, Art Fund 2022. https://bibli.artfund.org/m/53e933cf196387c3/original/Art-Fund-Curatorial-Diversity-report.pdf?_ga=2.8053490.1361718295.1668002249-1705646328.1668002249, accessed 10 November 2025.
- ² Gary Younge, ‘Britain’s Imperial Fantasies Have Given Us Brexit’, *The Guardian*, 3 February, 2018. <https://www.garyyounge.com/article/britain-s-imperial-fantasies-have-given-us-brexit>, accessed 1 December 2025.

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