

# Examining the Situation of Decolonisation Within the Culture and Heritage Sector in The South West of England

# 2020

## Executive Summary



# Acknowledgements

BSWN would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who took part in the interviews. We would like to acknowledge the support of Dr Nicole Truesdell from Brown University in co-designing the research and providing the academic framework. We would also like to acknowledge the support of Matthew Branch and Jennifer Sharratt, who conducted the interviews with the mainstream cultural heritage organisations. We would also like to acknowledge Matt Jacobs and Nicole Truesdell for writing the original grant application for the National Lottery Heritage Fund which made this research project possible.

The research presented here was co-designed and conducted by Black South West Network's research team: Sado Jirde (director BSWN), Christelle Pellecuer (cultural heritage manager), Suzanne van Even (research lead for the interviews with the community-based organisations) and Dana Saxon (research assistant).

The final report was written by Nicole Truesdell, Sado Jirde, Matt Branch, Christelle Pellecuer, Suzanne van Even, and Dana Saxon.

# Context

As a race equality organisation, the Black South West Network (BSWN) has spent the past ten years engaged in both community-based research projects with the support of the National Heritage Lottery Fund and policy reform within the city - one helping to inform the other. Our latest project over the past year, has focused on Intangible Cultural Heritage. The aim of this research project is to collect how concepts like decolonisation, diversity and inclusion are understood and used within organisations in the South West of England. Using this information, we then make recommendations on how to influence and push the discussion around decolonisation and inclusion with cultural heritage institutions as a way to create and embed change in the sector. Considering recent developments with the Black Lives Matter movement and other social movements focused on inequalities, this project could not have been planned at a more opportune time.

# Methodology

The BSWN team interviewed 32 representatives from 28 organisations across the South West of England. Organisations were of varying size, ranging from one single freelance consultant to larger organisations with 80 employees. All the interviewees working for mainstream organisations identified as white. The representatives of the community-based organisations were all African, African Caribbean, and Asian, apart from one participant.

The key areas for discussion during the interviews included:

- Defining inclusion and identifying barriers to inclusion,
- Defining decolonisation and identifying barriers to decolonisation,
- Identifying the successes organisations have had in engaging with inclusion and the changes they would like to see within their own organisations and in the cultural heritage sector as a whole,
- Engagement, collaboration and partnership between organisations.

The data from the interviews were mapped and interpreted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes identifying the common threads extending throughout the interviews with both mainstream and community-based organisations were discussed and agreed within the research team before being finalised (De Santis & Ugarizz, 2000).

# Key findings

The key themes from the interviews with community-based organisations appear to mirror those from the interviews with representatives of mainstream organisations. It is like they are two sides of the same coin.

## Mainstream organisations expressed:

- A professed commitment to inclusion and a desire to diversify their audiences and workforce but a lack of success, due to a paucity of funding, (workforce) capacity, and other resources,
- Interest in partnering with community-based organisations in order to achieve goals, but struggling to find community partners or partnerships tending to end when projects finish,
- A desire to partner with other mainstream organisations to address inclusion challenges. While some institutions were already partnering with other mainstream organisations others were hindered by lack of time and resources,
- A greater interest and engagement with inclusion than with decolonisation. Participants were happy to add seats to the table but less inclined to give up authority.

## The requirements of community-based organisations as identified in the interviews reflect those that the Black South West Network had previously identified (e.g. in the 2018-2019 BSWN Impact Report):

- Lack of investment - more funding should be made available to community-based organisations for them to be able to develop into sustainable mainstream companies,
- Lack of support,
- Limited networking and collaboration opportunities,
- (Institutional) racism.

There were a few overarching themes in both sets of interviews and these will be discussed in greater detail below.

## Capacity building and lack of investment

Both mainstream and community-based organisations said they lacked the necessary resources (time, money and staffing) to fully invest in decolonial practice. There is a constant tension between weighting what organisations' priorities should be and where their resources should be spent on. For mainstream organisations, spending more time on decolonial practices, for example, means that they need to sacrifice other activities. It is a constant balancing act. Similarly, both mainstream and community-based organisations argued that they lacked the necessary resources to build sustainable collaborative partnerships with each other.

Community-based organisations highlighted the fact that they are not able to obtain the necessary funding (both for individual projects and to become sustainable organisations). It is of particular interest, that whilst mainstream organisations see themselves as lacking in funds, community-based organisations instead believe they do have access to funding.



An **extractive relationship** exists between mainstream and community-based organisations. Community-based organisations believe that mainstream organisations focus on their needs first by pulling everything from a project that benefits them without giving any (financial) support in return to community partners; they do not receive financial compensation for their expertise, work and time. This has been seen by community-based organisations as an example of the continued nature of colonial practice within institutions.

## Fear of the “unknown”

Although mainstream organisations are interested in change and acknowledge the challenges involved, there appears to be a lack of drive for change, as reported by the community-based organisations. For example, community-based organisations describe any changes that are being made as “tokenistic” and as “box-ticking”. Ahmed (2012) refers to this as **conditional hospitality**, when you are welcomed on condition that you give something back in return. People of colour are welcomed on condition they return hospitality by integrating into a common organisational culture, or by “being” diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity (Ahmed, 2012).

Furthermore, community-based organisations talked about experiencing an entrenched unwillingness of mainstream organisations to give up power. It is interesting that in this context some mainstream organisations talked about not feeling confident reaching out and engaging with African, African Caribbean, and Asian communities and instead seeing community-based organisations as access points. This sentiment was reflected in one of the interviews with community-based organisations, whereby the interviewee commented on the fact that white people often lack the confidence to engage with community-based organisations out of fear of not taking the right approach. There is also the issue of not knowing who to talk to and a fear of getting it wrong, as one representative of a mainstream organisation described it.

Mainstream organisations discussed that they have set themselves targets that they are not able to achieve. Moreover, mainstream organisations feel that the magnitude of the problems that they face make any progress difficult. For example, they described the tension experienced between trying to reach out to new audiences and at the same time retaining existing, regular visitors.

## Partnership building as a key to bring about engagement

Partnership (and lack thereof) was a key theme in both sets of interviews. Mainstream organisations stated that they engage in both content-based partnerships (i.e. working with local artists to create an exhibition or collaborating with a community-based organisation on public programming) and outreach-based partnerships (i.e. audience development and diversifying workforce). However, community-based organisations argued that partnerships are often quite tokenistic and are really only partnerships in name. In other words, they posited that there is no real long-term relationship building. Community-based organisations would be asked for help with a specific aspect of an ongoing project and once that task has been completed, the partnership would end, often abruptly.

Community-based organisations stated how difficult it is to build any meaningful relationships with larger organisations. Moreover, as they are often grassroots companies, they lack the capacity (in terms of staffing, financial resources and time available) to form new partnerships. Moreover, they described how much time and effort it takes to try and build up any kind of long-term relationship with mainstream organisations, making

this unsustainable for their type of organisation which is often largely dependent on volunteers.

Interestingly, mainstream organisations too quoted that budgetary and time constraints made partnership building difficult for them. According to Stacey Mann, a professor of Museum Studies at the University of the Arts (USA), it is important to engage all stakeholders in engagement “[t]his isn’t the work of one person or one department within an institution. It belongs to all of us” (Jones-Rizzi & Mann, 2020).

## Diversifying the workforce, content and audience

The community-based organisations also called attention to the fact that there is a lack of African, African Caribbean and Asian representation on executive boards and in the workplace of both mainstream cultural heritage organisations and funding organisations. Mainstream organisations have acknowledged the lack of diversity in their organisations despite their efforts to be (more) inclusive. Additionally, the small number of African, African Caribbean and Asian staff members who are working in the mainstream organisations, mostly work in the lower-paid jobs, such as cleaning staff, stewarding and receptionists as opposed to having curatorial roles or (senior) managerial roles.

This lack of representation is also reflected in lack of diversity in exhibitions. Participants from mainstream organisations expressed desire to diversify content and mentioned specific exhibitions that focused on African, African Caribbean and Asian artists but rarely did participants mention ways in which they were co-curating exhibitions with community leaders and organisations. Furthermore, while many participants spoke about “sharing authority” with outside organisations, very few participants mentioned the ways in which they have recognized and sought the expertise of community leaders. As a result of the content and programming not reflecting their community, the audience that mainstream organisations attract is not diverse either.

This lack of diversity is also reflected in the literature with regard to bias existing within organisations’ setting. Museum staff must address “issues of implicit bias in how we approach exhibition planning and development—the language we use, the people we hire, the stories we tell, the design choices we make” (Jones-Rizzi & Mann, 2020). Based on her study of museums across the US, Europe, and Australia, Elisa Shoenberger (2020) concluded the decolonising overhaul must begin with the biases of decision makers. Questions should include: “Who are the people who make the decisions about the exhibitions? What is shown in the exhibitions? How is the story told? Do the decision-makers have a decolonial mindset? Are they aware of their own biases?” (Shoenberger, 2020). And although some organisations hope to find an easier solution that requires less introspection among team members about themselves and the work they do, that will not be possible. As Mann explains, addressing internal bias is difficult work: “I still see a lot of museums holding back, waiting for some cookie-cutter solution to present itself—a straightforward checklist that can be absorbed into an already overcrowded work plan. That’s not how it works. There is no silver bullet” (Jones-Rizzi & Mann, 2020).

Sara Wajid (2020), previously Head of Engagement at the Museum of London now joint CEO of Birmingham Museum Trust, also argues that open and trusting conversations must take place among all members of communities, even if they become uncomfortable or painful. She explains, “Get into it. It’s nasty. It’s dirty. We’re talking about power and authority. It’s a tussle. And it’s complicated. I say to open up a space of radical trust between insider activists, and outsider activists, and people of colour, using museum collections” (Wajid, 2020). At the Birmingham Museum, Shaheen Kasmani (2020) observed that thoughtful and difficult dialogue led to progress: “Through many deeply uncomfortable conversations, they forged a radical narrative approach to display that put Black and POC audiences at the centre and questioned the colonial record of the city’s godfather”.

## Terms like decolonisation and inclusion are complex and problematic

Overall, mainstream organisations were comfortable with defining and explaining inclusion, but they found the term decolonisation much more difficult to engage.

Community-based organisations found the meaning of buzzwords in general, and words like inclusion and decolonisation specifically, problematic. Not only is their meaning unclear, a lack of critical evaluation renders them meaningless. This ties in as well with the comments around decolonising the mind – if you don’t reflect and critically evaluate thought processes etc., it is not possible to achieve change.

Furthermore, the use of buzzwords distracts from the real issues at hand (such as the need to diversify the workforce and build sustainable partnerships between mainstream organisations and community-based



## In education

There is an increasing call for decolonising the curriculum content and the educational systems - including structures, teaching and support staff. There is a call for questioning who is teaching, what the subject matter is and how it is being taught at both school and university level. To put this into perspective, according to a report from the University and College Union, during the 2016-17 academic year just 25 black women were recorded as working as professors compared to 14,000 white men (Muldoon, 2019). Moreover, the majority of reading lists and school resources are from white authors and pupils and students are taught to only see one perspective. There has been little change since the Staying Power (2019) report publication, which drove the rising demand for equity and fairness in school.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the French sociologist, developed the concept of habitus and cultural assets. By habitus, he referred to the idea of a culture that is associated with a social class or group. Because teachers are often middle class themselves, they have a middle-class habitus and relate better to pupils and students from similar habitus. He also argued that children of middle-class parents would likely

have cultural assets (knowledge, behaviours, cultural experiences), as well as capital assets, that would put them in a privileged situation and ensure that they succeed in life. Similarly, Basil Bernstein (1971), referred to the different language codes used by people of different social classes. He argued that teachers and textbooks use a different language code to working-class pupils and this in turn contributes to the rise in inequality in schools. In view of this, pupils and students from a different cultural or racial habitus who have a different language code, are likely to be at disadvantage if they are not from the same habitus as their peers or their teachers. It is therefore important that teachers and course contents represent the pupils and students if one wants to bring about social justice in the classroom.

In her article about the lack of diversity in humanities taught at university level, Pozniak (27 January 2020) argues that the problem starts at school, *"where the history that is taught is predominantly white and Eurocentric and is the start of an enduring and implicit bias against history from the perspective of those who are not white"*.



## In the mind

If there is no reflection on how colonial thinking has impacted the way that people think about themselves and others, true decolonial practice can never really be achieved. Often decolonisation focuses on the repatriation of colonial objects in West-European museums, but part of the decolonisation concerns our mindset, and this is a feeling reflected in several responses from the community-based organisations. To quote Gloria Wekker: as a previously colonised people we have *“to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity”* (quoted in Van Beurden, 2018).

Furthermore, decolonial theorist Franz Fanon (1963) argued that the trauma of colonisation lies at the root of the economic and psychological degradation of people who have been colonised. Colonial thinking has been the driving force behind negative, often patronising, dismissive and at times humiliating forms of stereotyping and the stigmatisation of people. As Dr Martin Luther King described it – people of colour are made to feel inferior and experience a sense of ‘nobodyness’ (King, 1999, pp. 192) To this day, this has impacted on how people of colour are perceived, by viewing them as “others” as opposed to equals. It has also led to people of colour internalising negative views about themselves (i.e. feeling “not worthy” and “less than”).



## In spaces

The relationship between cultural and heritage organisations and people of colour has historically been fraught. Museums are perceived as temples of colonialism, or as Errol Francis (2020) described them as systems of power (i.e. power systems of regulated behaviour – visitors are expected to behave in certain ways within cultural spaces). With museums presenting what is considered as ‘high culture’ (i.e. European) and a strong tendency of ‘othering’ everything that is not considered ‘White’ and ‘European’. The British Museum for instance is a prime example of the relationship between power and architecture – it makes gestures about classical knowledge, imperial statements, systems of learning and it firmly regulates the behaviour of those visiting (Francis, 2020).

In this context reference is made to Wintle (2016) who refers to the ambivalent role museums played in empire building. He argues that museums are products and also agents of social and political change; they are influential in practices of identity formation, political negotiation and economic development.





## Financial inclusion

Decolonisation should also work at an economic level.

Community-based organisations highlighted the fact that one cannot talk about decolonisation without addressing financial inclusion and reparations. They believe that there should be ease of access and availability of finances and funding in order to allow them to function on the same playing field as mainstream organisations and allow them to become sustainable. They are of the opinion that grassroots organisations still suffer from financial exclusion.

Leyshon and Thrift (1995) defined financial exclusion as those processes that serve to prevent certain groups and individuals from gaining access to financial systems. According to Sinclair (2001) financial exclusion means the inability to access necessary financial services in appropriate forms. Existence

of administrative burdens and bureaucracy were some of the examples cited by community-based organisations that prevented them to access finances fairly.

Similarly, community-based organisations spoke about financial compensations. They believe that financial reparations and restitutions should be considered to redress the violation of the basic human right caused by colonialism and trafficking and enslavement of African people. They do, however, recognise that reparations go beyond financial compensations and some respondents talked about restitution of lands, languages and acknowledging the wrongdoing as well as offering apologies.

# 8. Recommendations

Key recommendations are to make engagement, inclusion, diversity and decolonisation a priority by investing resources - i.e. the right amount of time, finance and workforce. These recommendations are split across three different sets:

1. Funding organisations,

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2. Mainstream cultural and heritages organisations,

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3. Community-based organisations.

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## Funding organisations

- Provide more support to allow grassroots, community-based organisations to apply for larger sums of funding, e.g. above £15,000.
- Employ a more diverse workforce to assess funding applications and to sit on their board of trustees and funding panels.
- Offer support in kind - e.g. help with writing funding bids.
- More accountability from funders by checking how funding is spent by mainstream organisations.
- Build stronger relationships with community-based organisations. Relationship managers should be more visible and available to all and not to just the few. Funders should also encourage their staff to visit community spaces in order to build relationships and encourage organisations to apply for grants. The focus on project-based work has also put community-based organizations at a financial disadvantage. Funders need to develop better relationships with community-based organizations (and vice versa) to ensure better flow of resources amongst community-based organisations.
- Host information sessions and open dialogue sessions with community-based organisations.
- Foster collaborations between mainstream organisations and community-based organisations by offering funding opportunities for collaborative projects.

## Mainstream cultural and heritage organisations

- Engage all stakeholders: for decolonisation efforts to begin, everyone involved with cultural and heritage organisations, including staff and community members, must be engaged in the process.
- Be open to having uncomfortable conversations: in some cases, this engagement will require difficult conversations about complex topics, such as racism and violence. The dialogue needs to be open and genuine to be fruitful.
- Any existing biases need to be addressed: All staff members, especially those at high levels in the organisation (i.e. the decision makers), must address their own implicit biases. This is a necessary, yet challenging step in the process of decolonising an institution. Diversifying the workforce is more than just hiring a few more non-white people. The BBC (July 2020) recently included an article with 10 top tips for diversifying your workplace, which include addressing microaggressions in the workplace, moving past being uncomfortable with unconscious bias training, don't stop at levelling the recruitment playing field, and treating diversity as a business issue.
- Allocate proper funding and time: While many culture and heritage professionals can be commended for engaging external stakeholders to centre stories and artefacts from marginalised populations, more work must be done to ensure proper allocations



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