Who is really ‘hard to reach’?

By Erin O’Brien
PhD Researcher exploring museums, whiteness and institutional power
https://www.erinobrien.co.uk/

I don’t have a museum background; I have never been particularly drawn to museums, but I like the arts. I am quite a creative person, I used to draw a lot, and I still do some artwork, and I write poetry. Over time, I have, however, come to study museums as a way of critiquing them. This work is personal too, I have two children who are racialised differently, and as a white mum, I wanted to educate myself for them, so I can help them navigate the racial lines of our society as best I can.

I started this journey during my MA in Black Humanities at the University of Bristol. I wanted to learn about British Empire and ‘race’ in ways school and society hadn’t taught me, so I could be a better mum and teach my kids what I know school won’t. One module, *Museums and Heritage: Critical Perspectives*, captured my attention. It explored how museums were originally built as colonial tools, to reinforce the invented racial hierarchies we still have today; displaying ‘Others’ for a white middle-class audience taught to see themselves as superior. Museums are still like this today, tangible buildings where racism and white supremacy is displayed blatantly yet also unseen in how it has become so normalised and authoritative.

I remember taking my kids when they were little to the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, high up on the hill in the city – their first ever visit to a museum. They found it horrifying. The taxidermy, the Egyptian display with human remains in glass cabinets, the way death was displayed as an object – all of it felt deeply unsettling to them. My eldest son even reflected that the museum staff might be cursed, saying people should not be taken from their graves. The kids felt an injustice for the animals too, the stuffed animals in cabinets in the gloomy dark. The smell of the space made them recoil; they could not understand why they were in the museum, what it was all about. The whole space was bewildering to them.

This experience made me think: who are these museum spaces really for, and what values do they reflect? Even the museums ‘diversity’ and decolonisation projects felt to me like they were replicating the same racial dynamics they claimed to challenge. These experiences led me to further study museums in my PhD at the university of Leicester, flipping the lens: rather than researching Black or brown people as the ‘problem’ which I felt I kept seeing; every museum, every institution was (and still is) talking about the need to ‘engage’ ‘Others’, to decolonise their white colonial spaces by ‘getting’ non-white people into those spaces, as if that would magically solve the problem. But wasn’t the problem whiteness? I started examining whiteness and institutional culture, thinking that all these ‘diversity’ initiatives and collaborations are white

self-serving. They are ways to try hide, to look like something is being done, when very little changes; like a performance, a placation, to look like 'good' colonists now.

If we ask ourselves, who invented 'race', who benefits from this? It is white people, white people invented 'race', a white over Black dichotomy, and who will protect it and try and mask it – whiteness right? So instead of continuing with the status quo of problematising Blackness I wanted to interrogate whiteness.

My research has focused on exploring exhibitions about 'race' and colonialism, looking closely at what tends to replicate racial and colonial dynamics – and importantly what does not. I am developing a theory for how to reduce harm when curating exhibitions on 'race' and colonialism in ways that both do not replicate trauma and 'Othering' to people who are all too often 'Othered' in white dominant institutions, but also ways to expose whiteness and encourage white people to engage in colonial and racial history and legacy.

To do this, I have spoken to a wide range of people, artists, curators, historians, museum professionals, and academics. I spoke to people about specific exhibitions, and I also chatted with people to bounce my theoretical ideas, to see what resonated, or what problems they envisioned, or what could work in practice. My goal was to seek people with expertise who could help me – people with experience in the sector, who have worked on exhibitions about colonialism, or who engage with narratives in a way that help them understand the dynamics of whiteness and institutional power.

Even though the museum, arts and heritage sector is dominated by white people – particularly white women – the landscape shifts a little when it comes to work on 'race' and colonialism and anti-racism. Many people in this field are Black and brown, though there are lots of white academics doing this work too. So, the field is complex, and while I did not set out to anaylise participation engagement in my research, what transpired felt interesting and important to note.

When I began inviting people to take part in my research, I reached out by email to people whose expertise aligned with my study – curators, artists, historians, museum professionals, academics. I aimed for a balance, inviting people across different racialised backgrounds, but expertise was the priority.

The response was telling. Only four people replied to my initial emails. It feels hard to talk about this without reducing people to racial categories, but it also feels important to voice these patterns of engagement on a study that interrogated whiteness and institutional systems, and participation – or lack of it – which reflects something about who is willing to engage. Throughout this piece I use the terms Black and brown to reflect the specific racial dynamics of a white-over-Black society – an anti-Black structure created through colonialism that continues

to shape all aspects of life. This terminology does not erase the experiences of people who are not racialised as Black or brown who experience racism. Rather, it reflects the particular historical and structural focus of my research: the construction and maintenance of whiteness and white supremacy in its original formation – a hierarchy which has positioned Blackness at the bottom, and white at the top; and the enduring legacy of that fictious classification we still have today. Where possible, I have used terminology for how people have self-identified themselves.

In addition to emails, I made a call-out on LinkedIn, which brought more responses. Overall, I wanted to speak to about ten people, a small number, but I wanted in-depth conversations rather than just big numbers. Those who participated included Black men and women, people of mixed Black and white heritage, people of Indian heritage, a person of mixed Indigenous Canadian and white heritage, and two white women. There were slightly more Black men than women, with a balance of genders, female, male and non-binary.

Those who didn't come forward were predominantly white – particularly white men who did not come forward at all. No Southeast Asian people participated either. Two Black leaders of organisations I reached out to also did not reply, which is important to note, but the broader pattern was striking: when whiteness is being examined, many white people – especially those embedded in institutional culture – are noticeably absent.

One of the most interesting things to me about this research was the reasons people gave for taking part – and for not taking part. Those who are racialised as Black and brown almost universally expressed a desire to be part of institutional and systemic change. People wanted to challenge the system, create change, and to be actively engaged in reshaping exhibitions and practices in museums. Many people were also curious that I, as a white researcher, was studying whiteness rather than the usual dynamic of white people studying Black and brown people. By contrast white participants – there were just two – engaged for very different reasons. One had a brown partner and was reflective on whiteness and 'race'. Another, who was a professor, participated primarily to learn from me as part of her own research, which felt more extractive than collaborative. While both were thoughtful and brought valuable insights and reflections on whiteness and the ways it works, there were notable differences as they didn't carry the same collective desire to challenge institutional systems.

The pattern of absence was equally telling. A couple of Black leaders replied saying they were too busy, and a white artist noted the same. But most of the non-responders were white. One white woman expressed her fear about being named in the research, and while I reassured her, she could be anonymised, and I sent two follow up emails, she did not reply to me again. Another person of Asian heritage felt she did not have the right expertise but offered to put me in touch with 'people of colour'. These responses reveal something important, both that for

white people, even those who have high-up professional academic careers built on studying colonialism have fears around speaking out about whiteness, perhaps about saying the wrong thing or how it may affect their reputation, I do not know. Also, there is an assumption that when the topic of research is 'race' that this means only people who are racialised as not white.

What this shows is that the usual framing of 'hard to reach' 'communities' (usually referring to Black and brown people, and more recently the white working-classes) is deeply misleading. Black and brown people are often labelled as disengaged, yet when the research genuinely interrogates the roots of racism and colonialism and is not extractive of people's time, work, or even bodies as if they are the problem and object of scrutiny; people are not only willing but actively engaged. While, on the other hand, those who benefit from the system of white supremacy are the ones absent, hesitant, or disengaged.

Even in a small study, this pattern challenges a longstanding stereotype: that Black and brown people are 'hard to reach' in research. In reality, engagement reflects where power and responsibility lie, and who is willing to take part in challenging it.

There's another layer I want to acknowledge, and it's been a part that has been hard to unpack in my mind. A couple of participants – a Black man and a brown man – reflected that speaking with me, their voices might be heard within institutions because I am white. This was an honest acknowledgement of the realities of the hierarchies and privileges that exist. At the same time, the dynamics feel complicated. In previous conversations with white museum professionals working in decolonisation departments, some have told me that they will only work specifically with people of African heritage on projects on colonialism. On the surface, this seems positive, a form of inclusion when people have been excluded. Yet, it is often inclusion on white terms, focusing on aspects of colonialism that serves white comfort and superiority- usually the exhibition of Black trauma and victimisation, which ensures white identity as superior, more than, or where white people can morally enact empathy without implication. It further highlights another truth – this 'decolonial' work can avoid fully confronting whiteness itself. It is a reminder of how whiteness can be selective in what it engages with, often protecting itself at all costs. Whiteness does not want to be confronted or exposed. I don't know if me being white means white people will listen to me more, because the words from my mouth are not ones that comfort white people, but I guess I will have to see. I want us all to be heard, but I accept my naivety in this, and the people I spoke with who see the structures for what they are.

All of this brings me back to the question of who is really 'hard to reach'? In research, museum and heritage fields, Black and brown people are framed as 'hard to reach'. But my research challenges this assumption. When the work genuinely interrogates the roots of racism, colonialism, and institutional power, Black and brown people are invested in participating. Yet, the silence or hesitancy of many white participants suggests that it is the institutions

themselves, and those who benefit from white supremacy, who are harder to reach. This flips the traditional narrative; it is white people who are hard to reach.

What this small study shows is that engagement isn't about a lack of interest from Black and brown people, but about where responsibility sits. When research attends to the roots of racism and colonialism, people who live with the consequences of these systems respond with passion, insight, and commitment. The hesitancy arises elsewhere – in the spaces and structures most invested in maintaining the status quo. Reframing who is 'hard to reach' redirects attention back to institutional power and the work still required within it. If museums and heritage organisations genuinely want change, the question is no longer how to reach those on the 'margins' (if any of us outside of middle-class straight cis gendered able-bodied 'norms' are really the margins), but how to confront what sits at the mythological 'core' of whiteness. As white American writer Robert Jenson once put it, it's time to turn the tables:

> Race problems have their roots in a system of white supremacy. White people invented white supremacy. Therefore, the color of the race problem is white. White people are the problem. White people have to ask ourselves: How does it feel to be a problem? (Jenson 2009).