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IN CONVERSATION

Esme Ward (Manchester Museum): in conversation

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Esme Ward is the Director of Manchester Museum and has been leading the 'hello future' £15 million capital project to transform the Museum. Re-opening in 2023, the Manchester Museum will include a brand-new South Asia Gallery, Lee Kai Hung Chinese Culture Gallery and Belonging Gallery as well as an Exhibition Hall and more inclusive visitor facilities and spaces.

This interview is part of a project led by Professor Bridget Byrne and Dr Roaa Ali at the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE), University of Manchester. We have been exploring how institutional practices in cultural institutions can reproduce and mitigate ethnic inequality, and Manchester Museum has been one of our case studies.

This conversation took place online on 2 September 2021

Decolonisation

ROAA ALI: Stuart Hall[1] questioned what and who are museums for? Whose heritage do they preserve and celebrate? How do you respond to these questions in light of the Black Lives Matter movement and a pandemic that exposed racial inequalities, both within the UK and globally?

ESME WARD: Well, I suppose my initial thought is that is a question posed quite a significant time ago, but which is more relevant than ever. And the "who museums are for" has changed over time. For me, museums are about reflecting and exploring the complexity of the human condition, and a place where we can understand each other. But, of course, we know that in terms of who comes to our museums, who see themselves in our museums, who feel they belong in our museums, that is not the population of the UK – that is not everyone. So, for me, it is the question that should be on every museum workers' lips: who are museums for, what are we here for? The ICOM[2] has been grappling for the last 3 years now with a definition of museums. There is a real sense of a shift in what museums are for beyond this idea of preserving, analysing, interpreting and displaying, to thinking about the difference that they can make.

If we do what we've always done, then we're going to get what we've always got – and the world has changed, it changed before Covid, it changed before Black Lives Matter. All of the

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inequalities were there, but they have been bought into such sharp relief, not least inequalities around race. It's now so central to the work of an institution like a museum – it has to be part of the conversation. The question is what we do about that, and how we make that move. This is about really opening up your museum, asking who works in your museum, examining the way we talk about people in museums – I'll be honest, I think it's grim and dehumanising. I struggle with the language of audiences, target audiences! That is an appalling way to talk about people. So, actually for me, there's a real shift happening that is about us understanding the care and the concerns of the people in our wider communities. All museums want to be more relevant and more inclusive, but do we understand what that means. I think there is a crisis going on in museums, because I think we have fundamentally failed to engage wholeheartedly with the cares and concerns of the people who are on our doorstep, the citizens, and the communities. And I think until we do that and we respond with urgency – and it's not just a program over there, but a whole museum response, we have a long way to go.

It's the museum thinking in public, having conversations with people, opening up whether that looks like co-production, greater collaboration, working across sectors, bringing lived experience to the heart of your museum and grappling with actually what that means. That means you might stop doing some of the things you've done before because you have always done them for the same people. That's at the heart of how we have to move forwards. Museums have always reflected preoccupations and values of their time. How are we going to do that today? The reality is museums have changed, but they have not changed that much, still.

So, it's an understanding of what your museum is for and then, if you want it to be for more diverse people, then on whose terms? I'll be honest, I have this real frustration with museums and I had a moment in my career where I realised that what existed was a veneer of inclusion. I find that phrase helpful because I think museums are very comfortable with a veneer of inclusion. So, it can all look incredibly inclusive, you can have wonderful inclusive programmes, but actually, in terms of the systemic changes we need to make, it still isn't happening. We have to find ways for that to be the case, and the only way I think we're going to ensure that those changes happen is if we have people who are impacted directly at the heart of these decision-making processes in our institutions.

ROAA ALI: Thank you. I'd like to follow up with a question related to what you said. I'm intrigued by your use of the word "crisis" and I see that in the context of the colonial legacy of the museum and how it's dealing with the contemporary moment of decolonisation. So, could what you said about bringing the lived experience into the museum space be, perhaps, in conflict with the ideals behind museum establishment? Within this context, what do you see as the role of museums in general, and Manchester Museum particularly, in this current moment of history where debates of decolonisation are both urgently called for in a broader discourse for equality and social justice, and contested in "culture wars" rhetoric? So, if we confront the crisis and the colonial legacy of the museum with this moment now of both "decolonisation" and "cultural wars", what is the role of the museum? What is Manchester Museum's role in those debates at this moment?

ESME WARD: In terms of Manchester Museum, our mission hasn't changed and it is really clear: it's to build understanding between cultures and build a more sustainable world, and I think that could never be more relevant. But, I suppose underpinning all of that –

and I think this does speak directly to this moment – I think museums have a real kind of power and I think they can be almost an empathy machine able to build empathy and understanding. I think they are among the few predominantly free civic spaces where you bring generations together and encourage conversations among them. So, for me, it's about how we build empathy and understanding through more inclusive stories, through broader narratives, through grappling with different perspectives. They help us understand the society we're living in, where it's come from, and also what we want to make for the future.

People may think museums are just about the past, but through the way you care for the past, you are staking a claim on what matters for the future, you are. I want to convey very clearly just how much museums are implicated in imperialism and how embedded that is within our disciplines and knowledge. A significant part of our work is exploring and challenging our assumptions, including divisions between nature and culture, chronological displays, etc. (all Manchester Museum's new galleries for example will challenge those hierarchies and divides).

At this moment, I think museums have to step up to the plate and open up these conversations, and also be clear about what they stand for, not what they stand against, not what they're reacting to. Manchester Museum will always have this broader educational mission to build understanding and empathy and consider what society we want for our collective futures. To become the kind of museum your city needs it to be, you must be open and engage with what's going on in your city, with what the impacts are across different communities, and that's how you enable your organisation to be more porous, perhaps, and then you can respond to that. That requires a level of agility and response that is a challenge for our museums. But for somewhere like Manchester, with the breadth of collections, it is a huge opportunity for us to support conversations and create, whether that's particular collections, exhibitions, displays or whatever it might be that encourages the kind of conversations that people want to have and need to have for the future.

How we show a greater commitment to healing and care and build a new ethics of care is critical to this work. That includes work on governance, distributing and supporting emerging leadership and resources – above and beyond, more inclusive recruitment. Decolonisation is a whole museum project and I've been reflecting on how we might make room (and current structures and work don't create safe space) for emotion, spirituality, protest, challenge and new possibilities … it's one of the reasons why I'm so excited about the Belonging Gallery, not least its imagining of different inclusive futures – it will be the first gallery you visit and sets the tone for your entire museum visit (this gallery didn't exist in inherited plans and has only emerged in the last 12 months).

ROAA ALI: I'd like to probe you a little bit further, if I may, because you mentioned that museums can be, and are, civic spaces open for all —

ESME WARD: Well, they're open for all if you know about them, and if you have overcome a whole host of barriers. I'm not being delusional and thinking "Oh well, they're open for all, so why don't we get more visitors?" There is serious work to do. Take threshold anxiety, that

sense of "why on earth would I come to this museum, it has no relevance to my life", all of that is at the heart of the work we're doing at the moment to understand how this museum can genuinely be useful and inclusive. The reality is we've done that for years in museums, but not with everyone. I mean, if you take it from a perspective of the collections: of course, museums are about collections, but museums are also about people! Yet, to be honest, the people most intimately connected to our collections, which are often people in countries of origin from source communities or diaspora communities, are the ones who are least connected to those collections. They are the ones who are often least engaged with.

ROAA ALI: Why is that?

ESME WARD: There are a whole host of reasons and that's everything from lack of curiosity around engaging them, concern around if they become more engaged with them, what demands they might make. The fact that they are often so distant from these collections has to do with the way they encounter them: the loss, the trauma and the way that these collections may be displayed, I think that there has been a lack of care around working with those people to ensure that these collections are displayed, and those connections are made. We have so much work to do around how we create the conditions that mean the museum can feel like a safe space for those communities. There's that thing about museums being safe spaces for dangerous ideas, well I'm sorry, but safe for whom? There are a lot of people for whom somewhere like Manchester Museum is not a safe space, actually – it's a traumatic space.

ROAA ALI: And is that because of the acquisition of the collection and the way that those collections are stored, and sometimes curated?

ESME WARD: The acquisition is a key part –to make an acknowledgement of that acquisition, there is so much in what museums don't say. It can be the way that those collections are used or not used, or how they can be turned into a product for your shop. It can be the way that those museums have failed to draw upon the expertise and knowledge that exist within communities to develop an understanding of those collections. Part of this for me is the presentation of those collections – there's a lack of transparency. So, all of those are part of this and a whole host of other issues around inequalities that are part of the story and completely interconnected.

We need to put significant time and effort into understanding how we might work with people in a way that isn't essentially replicating what's happened before, i.e. extracting the lived experience and the knowledge we need to do this or that for our institutional ends. I've been reflecting a lot on how a lot of museum work is still quite transactional, and a real challenge for us is to figure out what it means to work more relationally; how do you do that? How do you build these relationships not for this project or this bit of funding, but for the longer term? How do you do this so it's genuinely enduring, so it builds and it grows and starts to change your organisation?

For me, the work we're doing around building the South Asia Gallery is such a good example, and where that might go is changing all the time. It's a really interesting example of how you might start somewhere, but the minute you start working with

people and building the relationships, it changes you fundamentally – it changes your processes and your practice and it starts to change your policy. It means that we have members of staff at the museum who weren't there before, and we have posts that initially were project-based and now are permanent because when the doors open on a new gallery, it doesn't stop there; it just starts. We have decision-making processes that are changing in terms of who is making the decisions here, how do we avoid moving back as in "Oh well, thanks very much, we've got everything we need from you, you've co-curated the space and now we'll just go back to default and the museum takes over here".

If we're going to do this work and we're going to be much more open and are serious about creating a sense of belonging, we have to understand what the needs and concerns are of individuals, and then create the conditions for that belonging. That might be anything from some bricks-and-mortar changes – for example, we're working with a whole host of people on our new prayer room – or creating a particular space and thinking about who programs that, or how you distribute your funding beyond the museum to those partners you work with.

ROAA ALI: You raise important issues and questions. I want to go back to the idea of decolonisation and the fact that even though museums are civic spaces and can be open, we know that some communities are either made to feel excluded from that space, or they don't feel they belong. That also has to do with how museums collect and curate the past in a selective way. So, within this frame of museum practices and legacy, can decolonisation happen? My second question comes from the problematic "transactional" relationship you mentioned between the museum and communities, which in a way commodifies communities. I'm wondering what funding bodies like the Arts Council, National Lottery Heritage Fund and policymakers can do to first acknowledge that this is a problem, and then make changes to address that? How can we shift this "transactional relationship" through policy and funding strategies?

ESME WARD: So, first question is really interesting and, as you said, there's an inherent tension between a commitment to decolonising your museum and then essentially a curatorial practice and individuals and whether they are best placed to do that and open to do that. How to navigate that? If I'm really honest, I don't know. I've been reflecting on what's happened to curatorship at Manchester Museum in the last couple of years and it is shifting quite a lot. We now have a curator for our South Asia Gallery, Nusrat Ahmed, who started as a member of the South Asia Gallery Collective[3], so her background is community organising rather than museums. She has a fantastic range of skills in terms of creating the conditions for collaboration and being very open to that, but also an absolute commitment to bringing new narratives to the fore. In a short time, she went from being a member of the Collective to being what's called a "Community Producer" and then we realised very quickly that this notion of community producer is a bit weird because she was the curator of the gallery, so she now has a permanent role as the curator of the South Asia Gallery. Nusrat is building her knowledge and expertise about those collections, working with colleagues at the British Museum and with the collective, and they are building the knowledge together. I think this is a really interesting moment I'm observing in my museum regarding a different kind of knowledge generation.

That's one example and I've got another two to show this further. We now have a new role – "Curator of Indigenous Perspectives" – which has essentially emerged out of all of the work that we've done with partners in Australia. It's absolutely at the heart of decolonising the museum and has a very clear focus on indigenising the museum. Dr Alexandra P. Alberta was appointed to that role and is working with everyone in Manchester Museum, but particularly the curators to support them, to challenge and shift their practice. So, we're thinking about the wider shift, shift of processes as much as a shift of how we work with people and support them, not least the way that we record information about all of our collections and challenge the narratives around that. Alex is working with a whole host of colleagues but leading a new gallery development which will open along with the rest of the museum, in mid-February 2023. It will explore the notion of belonging, the emotional realities of belonging, looking at where collections are from, where they belong, but then also thinking about future notions of belonging.

My final example is that we recruited a new Curator of Living Cultures. More immediately we've been thinking about the way we work internationally, which is again still quite transactional. The way museums work internationally can be through touring exhibitions or research projects, and so we started thinking about what it would look like if we did this a bit differently. What would those relationships with source communities in museums in other countries look like? Thus we were very clear we wanted to have the opportunity to recruit internationally for that role, to allow for the possibility that we would recruit someone with a very clear commitment to decolonising the museum who wasn't coming from a coloniser perspective. We appointed Dr Njabulo Chipangura and he is bringing a perspective of having worked in South African and Zimbabwean museums. These examples show that we're thinking about what the future of curation is, how we have a real commitment to inclusive narratives, to working with people, and what are the shifts we need to make. I genuinely think we are learning as we go along. The thing I love about museums is that they are a collective endeavour. So, we're creating the conditions for listening to all of those different perspectives. The skill set needed for curators is, I think, shifting quite radically. I believe the future is collaborative, but you need to be able to work collaboratively with others, be attentive to other perspectives, bring those to the fore, honour and acknowledge those, and consider which stories you'll choose. You will always be selective, that's what curation is, so the question then is how you focus on bringing those other narratives to the fore.

ROAA ALI: I want to probe further and ask: How have these decolonisation debates changed decisions about what should be in a collection, for example? And whose voice and agency are represented in the collection? I am also interested in shifting the narrative about what a curator is. As I intimately know the South Asia Gallery because of the research[4] we have done there, I'm interested in how progress from a "member of the Collective" to a "Community Producer" to a "Curator" has happened? In terms of recruitment, I think this is transformative, as it also unsettles hegemonic expectations and ideas of what a curator is, as a custodian of knowledge and expertise that is, in a way, exclusive to racialised communities. So, could you situate that within the bigger question of the actual impact of decolonisation on the thinking and practices of museums?

ESME WARD: I've been thinking a lot about this and that notion of this being exclusive to racialised communities is a significant point. There are lots of examples in the museum where we recruit someone who may not be the most experienced candidate and what we do is support them in that role. Why would this be any different? So, for me, this is about our intention.

If we meet somebody and we feel they align with the values of the museum, they have a wholehearted commitment to being the kind of museum we envision to be with people and they need some additional support in whatever area that may be, I think we must support them. And to be frank, I think it's lazy if we don't. So, if we want to change, and I think we need to change, we have to work at it. At the moment we're recruiting an Environmental Action Manager, and while it will be important that they have a relationship with the environmental sector, they may come from an activist background and have never worked in an institution or a museum. But we can support them with that, we know the museum bit! It goes back to wanting that enduring relationship and where you choose that investment to go, which links to your question about funders actually – particularly with the permanent role, we're in this for the long term. I don't know if I've answered your question?

ROAA ALI: You have, thank you, and it's a way of also re-questioning what skills are needed and valued, and what skills are devalued or not even on the radar in museum recruitment. I think it's really important if the sector wants to go forward to question who an ideal candidate is, is there a preconceived idea of what they look like and what skill set they have, and think deeply about our ideas of the "ideal candidate".

ESME WARD: That's one of the things we're interrogating. If you look at what we would want for certain roles now, it is different. For example, why would you need to have a degree for certain roles? There are a whole host of other forms of experience and relationships somebody may hold that may be far more useful, and we can support people to study for university. For me, this is us thinking long and hard about who works in the museum and what they bring, and what are we valuing. We're a university museum, we have all sorts of researchers, access to expertise, you name it – actually what's a hugely valuable skill for us moving forwards is people who can really work with that and others and bring all of that together.

ROAA ALI: Could this decolonising momentum translate into policy? If yes, then how? How can we address the wider museum sector? How can policy relate to, and have a current relationship with, what's happening socially and politically?

ESME WARD: This is a really interesting question and I think one of the things that are challenging with this question is a sense that the museum sector is a coherent or cohesive sector. One of the things I love about the museum sector is its diversity, not least in terms of governance – whether independent museums, DCMS-funded government museums, regional museums, university museums, council museums. There isn't a kind of sector policy above and beyond. We have the Museum Association Ethics. But even with Arts Council England, they do not fund every museum – they are the sector development body for museums, but only for England. We are a very fragmented sector. So, I think this

becomes a question about influence as much as about policy and the ability to influence the policies, whether that's within a city council or in my context, within the university.

So, if you just look at the work around recruitment, for example. We're going to be doing significant recruitment in the next year, with over 30 roles as we reopen. That is an enormous opportunity to do this work. The university has a new Head of EDI – it won't surprise you to know that I am pushing for the museum to be seen as almost like an R&D for the university itself, as a place that is grappling with this and trying new processes to make sure that we have the most inclusive museum workforce we possibly can. So, that's me then trying to engage and influence, have those conversations and do it with the university.

ROAA ALI: So, influence by practice?

ESME WARD: Exactly and influence actually by the vision of where it will go and where it will take us, and that's where the policy does come in. So, the Arts Council's "Let's Create" strategy focuses on relevance and inclusion, as an investment principle, then every organisation should be grappling with the things we're talking about here. The other part of this for me is that funders are essential to all of this, and I am hugely thankful. If you take something like the Indigenising Manchester Museum work I've mentioned, it's funded by the John Ellerman Foundation, who availed funding to support curatorial expertise and new thinking about what curation might be, with the idea that that work will then influence the organisation as a whole.

We must be able to draw on funders like that, that funders are clear on what they stand for, and that we're allowed to try things that don't work. If you gave me a magic wand, what I'd love is to be thinking about funding generationally. The 2-year, 3-year projects are part of the problem here. That's why as soon as possible we prioritised and invested in a permanent curator for the South Asia Gallery. It is important for so many reasons, not least for us to think about how we do the work for the long term: you build the relationship, you don't just sort out the bricks and mortar and move on.

ROAA ALI: And what do you think about the politicisation of the museum sector in light of the former UK Culture Minister Oliver Dowden threatening funding cuts to those cultural institutions which remove controversial objects from display[5]?

ESME WARD: You know if I'm … I think … I think it was and is interesting. Because we've been having this really lively conversation and you've asked that question and immediately I'm so mindful of my words. And, that matters, and actually, just for the record, I'd like you to reflect that. Because that sums up, in part – and there are many other impacts – but that sums up part of the impact of this. So, I think it is not surprising, it is inevitable. I think it is exhausting. I think it is beyond unhelpful. And I, I think it means that we focus on the wrong things.

The sense of threat and fear. I'll be frank – me as a white woman, if I am feeling that in a role like mine with all the power and privilege it brings, how are so many of our partners in a whole range of organisations and communities going to feel? I have conversations with

them … what impact is this having? So, mostly I find it deeply upsetting and I am so mindful of the language I use. I am tired of the op-eds back and forth, not least from people in my sector. The positioning of who are the "good guys" and "bad guys" is beyond unhelpful. The language of war is used all the time – there are "battles"; its "culture wars"; it's all about taking a position. It detracts from the work. So, if anything, what it makes me do is double down and focus on what matters, which is the work.

ROAA ALI: I think it is important to record how it made you feel, and the threat and fear it created. Acknowledging these feelings in the context of the privileged position you have highlighted the precarious and vulnerable positionality that people who have been racialised might be experiencing in the climate of "culture wars". And it makes me wonder: what is our relationship with culture and the history we are writing. Should we be fearful to even ask this question? So, thank you for raising this, it is really important.

ESME WARD: The only thing I want to add is that I don't want there to be a sense of "therefore, we aren't doing anything", because the doubling down is important to me. When we repatriated collections to Australia at the end of 2019,[6] I wrote an open letter[7] to the museum sector reflecting on my, and colleagues', experiences and sense of how much of this work had been wrongly framed. The things I kept hearing people saying about repatriation and then my direct experience of it, and certainly my conversations with indigenous leaders and others, just felt like they were poles apart. And I wanted to find a way to articulate this mismatch, this separation.

I wouldn't, I don't think, write that open letter now. In part that's because actually, I'm quite bored of hearing from museum directors. I know you and I are having this conversation and I understand why that is, but increasingly in all of my work, I'm not doing so many keynotes. When I do, I try and do them in partnership. Recently Nusrat and I did one together. I do think there's something about really understanding when my voice is not helpful or does not move things forward. Instead, I could use my position to make sure other voices are heard, as part of my commitment to moving things forward.

ROAA ALI: I'm pleased that you picked up on the issue of looking always for leaders as the source of all knowledge and decision making. Because, even coming to you with the invitation to do this interview, I questioned the ethos of *Cultural Trends* focusing so much on leaders in this specific call. You lead and influence and have massive knowledge and it is amazing to have that conversation with you, but does that make other cultural workers in your institution of any less value?

ESME WARD: I completely agree and I accepted because I didn't want to be rude to you, but the same thing went through my head. Because recently, there have been a whole host of things I've just said "no" to, or "yes, but me and this person". Because this for me is absolutely about a very narrow understanding of what leadership looks like. I've been reflecting on this moment as the time to break with some of our traditions, and who exactly is the subject/focus of the in-conversation. I did a tweet a while ago where we had we had a leak as a result of heavy rain asking "Are there any leaders in museums not stressing about the rain" or something similar. It was really interesting

because what people read into that was "museum directors", which isn't really what I meant. I mean I was one, but actually, I'd been talking with our conservators and building operations team – they are museum leaders. So, I got a lot of people saying they weren't museum leaders, but they were stressing about this, and I got back and said "yeah, you're a museum leader". We still have this seductive old-fashioned notion of leadership.

ROAA ALI: I think it is fruitful to re-examine the idea of leadership, and whose voice is included and excluded here.

ESME WARD: Yes absolutely. At Manchester Museum, we don't have a leadership team as such, but a more distributed model. We have a Social Justice Group composed of staff from across the museum, and the co-chairs will be part of the new strategic team at the museum. They will be supported as co-chairs, but they are one of five key decision-makers, myself included, and they will be directly influencing and involved in the decision-making around investments, policies, you name it. If you run museums, you are thinking a lot about what leadership in your institution looks like and yet sometimes, certainly in terms of media, I think there's still quite a lazy, or kind of a default of what leadership looks like. It's why I was so delighted when Zak and Sarah became Co-Directors at Birmingham Museums Trust,[8] which for me felt like a real moment, but I haven't seen that followed yet.

Anti-racism rather than diversity?

ROAA ALI: Since the adoption of the Creative Case for Diversity in 2011, Arts Council England has argued for more diversity in the sector and attempted to address the issue with project-based funds and required diversity figures to be embedded into a reporting system. Conversely, Sara Ahmed[9] argues for "uncertainty" around the term "diversity" contending that the question of race (and racism) often recedes when diversity comes into view. In this context, can a museum be actively anti-racist through current diversity policies and initiatives? How can this be mitigated?

ESME WARD: This sits at the heart of the birth of the Social Justice Group in the museum. Interestingly, they collectively had a conversation and were very clear that they wanted it to be "Social Justice", not "Anti-racist" group, so there are maybe some parallels there. However, we – and I say we, because it is across all levels of the museum, although I wasn't involved in these conversations – had a very clear commitment to anti-racist training, not diversity training, and being very conscious of that difference. In terms of whether museums can be actively anti-racist, obviously I would bloody hope so, and if you're not, what are you doing?! I think it is crucial to understand the impact of the contributions you can make beyond your walls. What's your understanding of that anti-racist work you are participating in – is it in the context of broader anti-racist work within your area or city, or is it is solely for your ends as an institution to tick the box, for whatever funding it might be?

I suppose the current diversity policies and initiatives – despite all of the projects, the campaigns, the funding – none of this is systemic and that's the problem. It doesn't seem like rocket science to me, and this is why I am excited about what I'll be doing with the University of Manchester over the next year because we've got to do things

that make an enduring change, not for the "when I happen to be running the museum", but for the future – they've got to be embedded. At the moment, if we give our figures, as indeed we do around the diversity of the museum staff on board, and we haven't made any shifts to be more diverse, then what's the implication of that, what's the accountability? The lack of accountability, urgency and transparency is critical for individual institutions like mine to address. We've been identifying a funding pot solely devoted to support training and anti-racist work – that is an important thing to do. It's our commitment within the context of the museum to be clear and accountable. It has got to happen across the piece – it's public money, going back to the fact that museums are about people. I look at the Social Justice Group and the knowledge, commitment and values driving a group like that – they are clear and committed to anti-racist work. But if we don't create the systems and the processes that support that work, it's just dependent on individuals who care.

ROAA ALI: So, to summarise, you identified the problem of diversity becoming a tick-boxing exercise that in a way dilutes racism, or how it addresses racism in a way that dilutes the issue; and the problem of project-based, short-term investment that does not have sustained legacy moving forward.

ESME WARD: The other bit is thinking about "how you do this work". Sorry, I'm going full circle back to the questions: to what extent is your museum engaged with the work that is making a difference in this area? And I don't mean just in museums, it might be in an educational, charity context, or any sector. To what extent are you open? If you have that clear commitment to be anti-racist, how are you going to do it? Who are you going to work with? How are you going to support and finance it? Thinking of not just the next 3 months when everyone's done the course and it's done, but actually what does that work look like and what difference has it made in 5 or 10 years from now? How does that change your shop, or cafe, or the training you give your staff? I'm so interested in how museums learn to do more of this thinking in public, because actually if we do, we really bring in so much knowledge, expertise, support and challenge. At the moment, we are at the stage where we're sort of bizarrely trying to be solutions-focused, rather than grappling with what would this mean for us to do it wholeheartedly.

ROAA ALI: And it ends up being a trend. It should not be just a trend, a "flavour of the month", or that, for example, the impact of Black Lives Matter should be temporary.

ESME WARD: Yes. Black History month is such a good example. I understand where that came from, but we should think of the "and beyond". We've got to focus more on the beyond.

ROAA ALI: Indeed. On that note, the inclusion of ethnically diverse people in museum spaces without regard for the terms under which they are included is often criticised as a quick fix rather than addressing structural issue of inequality. What is Manchester Museum doing in terms of recruitment, which you mentioned before, but also contract types, and pay structure to ensure this is not the case? You mentioned the diversity reporting for the Arts Council, for example. And we know that those diversity reports

quite often don't reflect accurately on what is happening. So, for example, off a hypothetical 15% of staff that are ethnically diverse, a good percentage of those are in the low-paid service and maintenance kind of category, which does not reflect the creative:

ESME WARD: Or are on fixed contracts, as is likely in museums.

ROAA ALI: Right, and I think that's a real problem. So, on paper, it might look like there is a lot of progress happening, but in actuality, the fixed-term contracts, grading and who's in what roles get conflated in the overall picture, showing a veneer of equality, when in fact inequality is deeply seated in an institution. So, how is Manchester Museum addressing this?

ESME WARD: Yes, I think slowly, if I am really honest.

ROAA ALI: I think acknowledgment is part of the process.

ESME WARD: Part of our work with you[10] to date was to clearly understand, interrogate and have conversations with staff and a whole range of people around exactly these issues. In the sector, we're not going to be doing anything meaningful and productive until we understand the nature of the issue and how deeply embedded it is, and what might be needed to start to make that shift. Over the summer we reopened for a short time because of all the cuts we've had during Covid, we had essentially very short-term contracts for a range of people to come in just for that period, and they were fantastic; brilliant. But that short-termism isn't how I ever want to work again even though there was a distinct reason for doing it. Those 30 new posts that I've mentioned are all permanent and that's important to me. Because the fixed-term contracts, the short-term thinking means that actually, even if you do start to make some changes: you recruit this person and they're at a higher-grade role, or whatever it might be, and the money runs out, they move on. So, thinking about those kinds of permanent roles to me is critical.

We've done the things you would expect, we changed the way we interview. We changed who shortlists, so we have very diverse – that's all areas of the museum – and a wide range of staff represented on both shortlisting and interview panels. We've transformed the way we interview, and I think the people who are appointed show that. But, there has to be more we can do, and we're not there yet.

ROAA ALI: I'd like to open up the conversation more broadly, to how the museum sector in general can move forward in terms of policy to mitigate ethnic inequality?

ESME WARD: I think there are some fundamental core things, so I'm a big fan of things like Fair Jobs,[11] that's starting to call out things that aren't OK in terms of our sector. I think all those initiatives, which are very much kind of ground up, are really important because they make this conversation visible. And I think that conversation with funders around pay levels, and expectations of funders could be setting some very useful context for us. I think, working with your HR team, or whoever it might be, around

how you can be more explicit about what you're looking for. I think it is essential to put time and energy into building the relationships with people, communities and organisations that you'd like to recruit and work with. So, you're changing where ads go, and the language we use is so important. What are you doing to have conversations with people and test whether that language resonates? Does it put people off? Is terminology important, when it could be a huge barrier to what you do? All of these things are central.

ROAA ALI: And maybe considering the ethnicity pay gap reporting (similar to the gender pay gap,[12] for example) which is not mandatory yet. Do you think a call to make it mandatory might make that accountability just a bit stronger?

ESME WARD: Absolutely. It all comes down to accountability and understanding that if you haven't delivered essentially, then you need to live with the implications and what you've lost. Concurrent with this, we also need to profile the amazing examples of where this has happened, documenting the huge advantages institutionally, personally and in terms of relationship-building. Because that's a big part of this, as well. It's the right thing to do, but actually, in my case and my role, I want us to be the most inclusive, imaginative and caring museum we can be, because I think that's what Manchester should be asking for from us. And we aren't going to do that if everyone in my museum looks like me. Part of it is also, clearly showing the advantages – that has to be done very carefully and obviously with full consent from everyone, but I think it's just something that I've observed that hasn't been apparent.

ROAA ALI: If I may rephrase, I think what you're saying as well is just to link social justice and social responsibility issues and embed them within institutional practices, the rethinking of institutional organisation, and how these two work together actually to create a representative, inclusive narrative and culture.

ESME WARD: They are completely interlinked and they are co-dependent.

ROAA ALI: To make the museum work better.

ESME WARD: Totally and to make the museum work better with and for the communities. For the future. I think there's a lot of museums that are very comfortable with storytelling and narratives – admittedly very particular narratives that always take precedence. Increasingly, I'm interested in how we show so much of this work rather than solely kind of tell it and re-tell (and who's doing the telling). What we end up doing is crafting a narrative that doesn't reflect some of the experiences of those at the heart of this, certainly in terms of talking about race. I think there's something very interesting in that global majority perspective and how that is absolutely at the heart of what you do. But the way that museums tell the world about their work, including us, doesn't prioritise enough that perspective and that's the perspective I think needs prioritising.

ROAA ALI: This has been very insightful and thought-provoking. Thank you very much for your time and candid perspective.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall (1999). Un-settling "the heritage", re-imagining the post-nation: Whose heritage? *Third Text*, 13:49, 3–13. doi:10.1080/09528829908576818.
2. The International Council of Museums.
3. Manchester Museum employed a process of co-curation with members from the South Asian community, referred to as the collective, to design and curate contents for the new South Asia Gallery.
4. Professor Bridget Byrne and myself at the Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE), University of Manchester, have conducted intensive ethnographical research at Manchester Museum as a case study for a research project exploring how institutional practices in cultural institutions can reproduce and mitigate ethnic inequality (Ali & Byrne, 2022).
5. See https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/10/dowden-letter-on-contested-heritage-stokes-fears-of-government-interference/
6. In 2019, Manchester Museum worked with AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies) to return 43 sacred and ceremonial objects to their communities of origin. See https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/about/repatriation/
7. See https://museum-id.com/the-tide-of-change-open-letter-from-esme-ward/
8. Zak Mensah and Sara Wajid were appointed joint CEOs of Birmingham Museums Trust in November 2020. See https://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/blog/posts/zak-mensah-and-sara-wajid-appointed-joint-ceos-of-birmingham-museums-trust
9. See Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
10. Referencing the research project mentioned in note 4.
11. See fairmuseumjobs.org.
12. See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gender-pay-gap-reporting.

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