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# Against Whitewashing: The Recent History of Anti-Racist Action in the British Archives Sector

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# Against Whitewashing: The Recent History of Anti-Racist Action in the British Archives Sector

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## Abstract

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This article is an account of recent activity in the U.K. archives sector against white supremacy which is written by a number of people active in the work. Through our work, we are aware of previous initiatives in this area, but written sources about the history of this work are patchy at best. This account offers a description of recent activity so that it is “on record”. We recognise that a historical account of previous efforts would be valuable, but that is not our objective here. This article offers a statement of the problem of white supremacy in the U.K.’s archives sector. It then provides an overview of the work of organisations such as the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), The National Archives (TNA), and the Archives and Records Association (ARA). This is background for more grassroots activities and networks, which are described in the article. The article discusses the events at the ARA 2019 conference, which was a flashpoint for resistance to white supremacy in the profession, before discussing a number of subsequent activities that sought to define a vision for the profession in which white supremacy and other violent power structures are abolished. The article concludes by offering some thoughts about the future of this work.

**Keywords:** anti-racist action; archives; British archives sector; structural racism; white supremacy

**Publication Type:** review

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## Introduction

In 2015, the U.K.-based Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Archives and Records Association (UK & Ireland) (ARA) undertook a survey of workers in the U.K. Information Sector. The results of the survey illustrated, amongst other trends, that the workforce has lower ethnic diversity than the national U.K. Labour Force Survey statistic, with 96.7% of workers identifying as ‘white’ (almost 10% above the national workforce average). This whiteness of the information sector workforce is mirrored in the demographics of users of archives, with ARA’s 2018 Survey of Visitors to U.K. Archives indicating that across the 106 self-selecting participating archives, 96% of visitors completing the survey self-classify as white.



In response to the CILIP/ARA (2015) survey results, ARA Chief Executive John Chambers went on the record to say that, “the results show that we have much to do to get our own house in—not least on diversity and gender disparities” (ARA, 2015). Diversity has become something of a catch-all word to describe a sought for change within the sector, with the problem facing the sector often framed as being a lack of representation.

In writing about the state of Library and Information Studies, Honma (2005) seeks to get under the skin of such “representational politics” and surfaces how a focus on improving the status quo through fuller and more diverse representation can lead to a failure to engage with the underlying “social and institutional structures of discrimination.” Honma (2005) warns against efforts that “tokenize bodies of color” through investing in a rhetoric of inclusion and accommodation on the one hand, whilst avoiding articulating or challenging the structural oppression, historical legacies of violence, and institutional manifestations of racism and discrimination that create impossible power differentials and run like fault lines through our sector. Honma (2005), instead, draws on Chu (1999) to call for “social and color consciousness in our field in order to account for racist and other oppressive practices and the experience of disenfranchised people” (p.6).

Such colour consciousness, as described by Honma (2005), must begin with a critical engagement with whiteness both as a category for defining normativity and therefore constructing difference, and as an organizing and structuralising principle in social and cultural relations.

“whiteness” works as an invisible and elusive structure of privilege, one that allows for constant reinvention and rearticulation to protect the interests of a white racial ruling class. The identification of whiteness and its structuralizing principles is necessary in order to combat its invisibility and normative effects. (Honma, p. 5)

Hathcock (2015) draws attention to how the normativity and pervasiveness of whiteness “works insidiously, invisibly, to create binary categorizations of people as either acceptable to whiteness and therefore normal, or different and therefore other”. Therefore, if we really want to transform our sector into one that is inclusive and diverse then we must lift the lid on the invisibility of whiteness within our profession and our wider society, and more adequately interrogate how whiteness pervades through our principles, values, and practices.

For some, white supremacy is an uncomfortable term associated with overt and extreme acts of racism and far-right ideology. We use “white supremacy” in this paper in an all-encompassing sense to point to the pervasive structure of white privilege running through our society, as well as the racial exploitation that has resulted. In keeping with Caswell (2017), who first introduced the term in archival literature, we draw on Frances Ansley’s definition of white supremacy:

A political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Ansley, 1989, p. 1024, fn. 9)

White supremacy, therefore, does not only point to overt, explicit, and extreme acts of racial and ethnic hatred and violence but also to daily enactments of dominant white values that underpin systems, procedures, rules, principles, and regulations where overt prejudice gives way

to banal repetition of an accepted status quo coupled with uncritical acceptance. Honma (2005) uses Allan Bérubé's (2001) analysis on the unintentionality of gay whiteness to draw the more unconscious aspects of white supremacy to the fore. Bérubé states that,

It seems that so long as white people never consciously decide to be a white group, a white organization, a white department, so long as we each individually believe that people of color are always welcome, *even though they are not there*, then we do not have to examine our whiteness because we can believe it is unintentional, it's not our *reason* for being there. (2001, p. 252)

In exploring white people confronting racism, Peggy McIntosh (2009) introduces and explores some pervasive white cultural myths that have helped to keep racism in place. Through this work she asks that white people intentionally develop a new awareness of their white racial history and of how this impacts the present. Unpacking how white supremacy manifests in our institutions, our profession, our relationships, and our individual behaviours is therefore a vital component in developing anti-racist actions to dismantle and rebuild the sector for the benefit of us all. In the context of this article, we use the term "anti-racist action" to refer to instances of active and conscious opposition to racism and white supremacy where the focus is on change and transformation to existing inequitable infrastructures, systems, behaviours, and practices, building on the definition from the Racial Equity Tools (2020) resource which states that anti-racism is the "work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life". We recognise that in this article, in describing the work of different institutions, networks, and individuals that some institutional efforts are perhaps more aligned to diversity and inclusion work where the emphasis is on accommodation in the status quo as opposed to more explicit anti-racist work where enacting fundamental transformation is the starting point. However, these are included as they help contextualise the more directly anti-racist work of recent years. We acknowledge that there are not always clear definitions or consensus about distinctions between inclusivity and diversity and anti-racist action in the networks of people involved in these activities.

The purpose of this article is to give an account of recent activity to counter white supremacy and develop anti-racist action in the archival sector in the United Kingdom. It covers the period from 2017 to the time of George Floyd's murder on 25 May 2020, when the renewed vigour of the Black Lives Matter movement, and particularly the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston who traded in enslaved Africans, in Bristol on 7 June 2020, finally sparked a conversation in the U.K. archives sector about structural racism and white supremacy. These developments have led to new energy in anti-racist work in the U.K. archives sector, but it is too soon for us to characterise and reflect on its nature and effects. We confine our account to the few years that preceded the current work. We recognise that this work can be connected to a history of previous efforts and dialogue around the representation of the Black British experience in archival spaces. We recognise that a historical account of previous efforts would be valuable, but that is not our objective here. This account offers a description of recent work so that it is on record and may inform future work.

We begin with a discussion of the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), which is the major site of Black archival representation in the United Kingdom, before sketching out the activities of national bodies such as The National Archives (TNA) and the Archives and Records Association (ARA). This provides context to our subsequent discussion of the work of grassroots groups, universities, and informal networks of individual professionals.

## Black Cultural Archives in Focus

There are a small number of archive services in the United Kingdom and Europe which specifically collect archive material that relates to and comes from the experiences of people of African descent born and/or raised in the British/European parts of the African diaspora.

In London, the George Padmore Institute (founded 1991), the Huntley Archives at London Metropolitan Archives (deposited by Jessica and Eric Huntley, 2005), the Institute of Race Relations (founded 1958), and Black Cultural Archives (conceived 1981, constituted as a charity in 1995) are the collections and archive services with the longest running remit for documenting and preserving the British Black experience. These collections and archive services share commonalities in how they were founded, and by whom. A network of Black academics, creatives, activists, educators, and politically active individuals were the starting point for addressing what had been identified as a lack of recognition of the Black heritage of the United Kingdom, and specifically the contribution of Black communities and people to British identity and society. The swell of post-war activism and community building that prompted the creation of centres of study for Black history was led by people who had lived through the Second World War and witnessed the changing social dynamics of the immediate post-war period (Ishmael, 2020). This period in Black British history is punctuated by the arrival, and return, of British Black citizens from the British overseas territories and colonies. The period is named after the SS Empire Windrush, one of the ships on which migrants from British colonies, in this case predominantly from the Caribbean, arrived (National Audit Office, 2018).

The Windrush period was characterised by an invited migration of people from the then British Empire to support the rebuilding of the British Isles' infrastructure and economy after the Second World War (Hall, 1998). The migration of people from the Caribbean, especially people of African descent, to what Imperial education systems framed as the "Mother Country", was a turning point in post-war Britain's cultural, philosophical, and ethnic diversity, but was not the first time that Britain was formed by migration, and not the first time that British history was influenced by people of African descent (see, for example, Fryer, 2018). That the mainstream archival narrative, and collections of Britain did not, and do not, reflect Britain's diverse and global inheritance has been cited as part of a wider "whitewashing" of British-ness (Williams, 2020), contributing to racist stereotypes, educational attainment gaps, perpetuation of social inequalities, and unbalanced policy making. Contributing to the archival record are the sites in which Black archival history are collected and preserved. Beyond the general incidence of people of colour within wider institutional collecting locally and nationally, Black communities and intellectuals perceived that taking ownership of Black history would mean ownership and collecting of their own archives.

The Black Cultural Archives (BCA), the working name of the African People's Historical Monument Foundation, is today the Black-led archive that has been able to secure a permanent building, keeping its collections to industry standards and maintaining its independence as a standalone charity. With all of these factors coming together BCA is able to interact within forums, committees, and other spaces not normally inclusive to archives perceived as community-led.

BCA traces its origins directly from community action in direct response to specific incidents that highlighted a need for Black communities to not only see themselves represented in history and the curriculum in a realistic and non-discriminatory way, but also to reserve an anti-racist space for Black communities to be able to access heritage objects and collections. This act of self-help

expanded into the creation of what BCA's founders called an "archive-museum" containing material, deposited by members of the community, that evidenced and painted a more comprehensive picture of Black presence in Britain (Young, 2003).

The 2003 report created by BCA and the University of Middlesex on Black archives observed that, "throughout the 1980s many attempts were made, unsuccessfully, to attract interest from mainstream museums and archives to give moral and other support to the idea of creating a Black Cultural Archives" (Young, 2003, p. 3). A network of community activists lobbied the Greater London Authority and the London Borough of Lambeth, and each gave foundational financial support. Lambeth Council went on to contribute a sum towards the core costs of running BCA, and this arrangement is renewed by negotiation at intervals (Lambeth Council, 2019). Other funded support in the early phase of BCA came from the National Lottery via the Heritage Lottery Fund. The University of Middlesex worked with the BCA collective to establish a baseline of data on the collections held by BCA and a way forward. Over time the BCA acquired professionally qualified archives staff and support to conserve and store the collections. BCA has not, to date, established a stable funding source, remaining as an independent charity dependent on grants and individual giving.

By 2014, and almost four decades of fundraising and activism, BCA finally opened the doors to a dedicated headquarters for the charity. What had been the Grade II\*<sup>1</sup> listed, but derelict, shell of Raleigh Hall, a Georgian townhouse in the centre of Brixton, became 1 Windrush Square. At 1 Windrush Square, BCA can host exhibitions, workshops, programme Black visual and performing artists, residences, a literature programme, and weekly performance poetry. BCA currently co-delivers a module of the Kings College London undergraduate history course, has a collaborative doctoral student in residence, offers free legal surgeries for people affected by the 2018 Windrush Scandal, and provides free access to the unique heritage collections (BCA, n.d.). It is still without a stable funding income but is able to generate a small trading revenue from hires of 1 Windrush Square and its shop.

The collections at BCA remain essential to a study of Britain's post-war social history as well as Black British history since Roman Britain. BCA now holds the personal papers and oral histories of individuals and groups that illustrate and contextualise the development of race relations in the United Kingdom. Further evidence of the importance of BCA's collections came when BCA was a lead partner on BBC television's 2016 Black and British series, spearheaded by Professor David Olusoga. BCA partnered with Google to create the world's first internationally accessible platform for Black British History, showcasing digitised collections online through Google's Arts & Culture initiative.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2020, the BCA team launched a 10-year strategy to map the next phase of BCA. The five aims for 2030 for BCA include sharing the collections online, touring and in-person, and having an opinion and an active voice on relevant issues (Black Cultural Archives, n.d.-a). For a Black-led heritage organisation, much less for an archive, it is not acceptable to take a position of neutrality. Neutrality would not have achieved any of the progress that BCA has made in re-positioning Black perspectives in U.K. archives.

The BCA is an important component of the U.K.'s national archival infrastructure, holding as it does so much of the documentation of Black British experiences. However, much of the archival sector leadership comes from The National Archives (TNA), and some of its recent work relates to the structural problems we are concerned with here.

## The National Archives Sector Context

Between 2003 and 2006, four government bodies, the Public Records Office, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, and the Office of Public Sector Information—each specialising in particular aspects of managing information—joined together to form a single organisation in The National Archives (TNA).

Today, TNA is a non-ministerial department, and the official archive and publisher for the United Kingdom Government, and for England and Wales. The records which stretch over 1,000 years of history are largely interactions between the state and individuals. They include the records from the Colonial Office, the Home Office, the Foreign Office, and many more. The records show the changing narrative of our country, resistance to change as well as resistance to oppression, the changing demographic of the nation, the changing understanding of what this nation is, and what it will become.

Alongside TNA's responsibilities as an archive, it also has an important role in sector leadership and development, sharing the resources held by the institution to improve the sector for both users of records and record keepers. On the 9th of June 2020, Jeff James (2020), the Chief Executive of TNA, released a statement on racial equality.

Created from the perspective of state and empire, we hold important records that bear witness to past injustice and the long fight for equality in the Black community. Our records describe the incremental changes, the debates which took place behind closed doors, the policing and monitoring. Our records, like those of other archives, also show the ongoing and ever-present forms of resistance to racism, and struggles for social justice from within the Black community both globally and at home. (para. 3 )

In 2019, TNA recruited two new permanent roles, one of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Records Specialist in the Collections Expertise and Engagement Department, and the other an Inclusion and Change Manager in Archives Sector Development. In 2020, they began a diversity review of the grants they administer under the programs Collaborate and Innovate (comprising of Networks for Change Fund, grants up to \$15,000 GBP, and Archive Testbed Fund grants up to £5,000), Archives Revealed (comprising of the Cataloguing Grant, awarding up to £40,000, and the Scoping Grant which funds a report with expert advice on managing collections). This review has resulted in reflections on and adjustments to the programs and a commitment to be clearer in regard to definitions of, and commitments to, diversity.

Alongside reviews of the grants administered, there has been a concerted effort to explore the barriers that exist in diversifying the archive sector workforce, specifically the record keeping profession. Archives Unlocked, TNA's strategy for the recordkeeping sector, was influenced by a number of previous projects. The workforce element built upon lessons learnt through Opening Up Scotland's Archives and Transforming Archives, two separate three-year projects funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (Skills for the Future) 2014-2017 which worked in parallel to change the skills base of the archives sector across Scotland and England. The projects provided 55 trainees with new entry points into the archive sector. 21% of these trainees in England were from a BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) background, 24% of the trainees in Scotland identified as having a disability, 49% of the trainees had degrees in subjects other than humanities, while 89% of the trainees brought skills from a different career. While 70% of trainees carried on working in the archives or heritage sector after their traineeships, the trainees found



that many jobs advertised required a postgraduate qualification in archives and some trainees worried that they would not be able to progress in the sector without this qualification. As such, 50% of trainees, across both programmes, who were still working in the sector, went on to undertake the postgraduate qualification in archives (Bolton & Mckenzie, 2017).

As a part of the current strategy, TNA has continued efforts to develop and diversify the archive workforce, currently delivering “Bridging the Digital Gap”, a National Lottery Heritage funded training programme that provides 24 paid technical traineeships in archives around the United Kingdom. The 15-month programme aims to meet skills shortages and to help diversify the workforce by providing paid, high quality opportunities for new entrants to the sector. In 2019, TNA initiated work on the Level 7 Archivist and Records Manager apprenticeship, and now chairs the Trailblazer group responsible for the development of the apprenticeship standard. Archives and Records Offices across the country have worked together to create an apprenticeship that will enable people to train to be a qualified Archivist or Records Manager whilst in paid employment.

As a part of recent moves to place more value on collection building projects that develop the representativeness of the national collection, and to ensure that research in Black, Asian, and Minority ethnic history through records could be done in a rich and sustainable way, the Education and Outreach team consolidated the resources for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic histories on the TNA website into a finding aid. It includes education resources, exhibitions, research guides, blog posts, and podcasts by staff and external writers, and links to external websites (TNA, 2020). Recent examples of TNA’s engagement with groups from Black and Asian communities include:

- Ongoing work with the Young Historians Project (YHP), a non-profit organisation formed by young people aged 16-25, which encourages the development of young historians of African and Caribbean heritage in Britain. TNA has facilitated workshops with the YHP geared around archival research skills for their project exploring African Women and the British Health Service from 1930-2000.
- Collaborations with counsellors at Stillpoint Spaces, which describes itself as an “international community for the psychologically curious”, (Stillpoint Spaces International, n.d.) to put on a series of workshops entitled, “Racism Past and Present: An Exploration with The National Archives”, which explored stories, documents, and archives relating to the history of “race” and racism in Britain. These endeavors have developed into further work with The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network, which will result in an online workshop on Indian indentured labour and working with Nutkhut on their new project, Girit.<sup>3</sup>
- A series of podcasts which have drawn out aspects of Black and South Asian history, including stories as part of Refugee Week 2020 on the Partition of British India and the “With Love” podcast featuring the story of the Jamaican seafarer, James Gillespie, who was caught up in the 1919 Race Riots.<sup>4</sup>

TNA is aiming to ensure that inclusion and diversity do not become perceived as additional or optional to the Archives Sector core aims, and to maintain the pledge that Archives are for Everyone because they are about everyone.

Similarly, the national professional organization, the Archives and Records Association, has moved to address racism and white supremacy in archives and the archival sector, but it has also

been criticised for making these moves late and slowly, and it is a widely held view that its 2019 conference was a turning point in the professional dialogue around racism.

### The Activities of the Archives and Records Association

The ARA (UK & Ireland), was formed in 2010 following the merger of the Society of Archivists with the National Council on Archives and the Association of Chief Archivists in Local Government (ARA, 2010). Today, the ARA has around 2,500 members, primarily in the United Kingdom and Ireland but also internationally (ARA, n.d.-a). The ARA aims to be the lead body and voice of the record-keeping sector. Its objectives are to embrace the challenge of broadening access to records and participation in record-keeping for all. It asserts that inclusivity is at the core of its ethos and there are a number of ways in which it promotes this ethos.

During the period of 2015 to 2018, several pieces of research were undertaken which indicated the record-keeping profession was 97% white, a profile reflected by volunteers and users in the sector (see ARA n.d.-b; CILIP/ARA, 2015). Workers who identified as “marginalized” felt isolated and unsafe, there was lack of diversity especially at senior levels, and it was harder for people from certain backgrounds to obtain professional qualifications (see CILIP/ARA, 2015). In 2018, the ARA commissioned an independent report (Dabiri, 2019) into previous efforts to diversify the workforce. The report highlighted that minimal progress had been made since 2009 and identified that “hand-wringing”, “hand-washing”, and “DIY” initiatives had had a little overall effect on the diversity of the record-keeping sector.

Following the report, the delegates and speakers at the ARA’s 2018 annual conference, which was held in Glasgow, agreed on the need to drive change across the sector. This resulted in the publication of the Glasgow Manifesto (ARA, 2018). The manifesto outlines the ARA’s commitment to being an agent for change and championing the variety and diversity of the communities it serves in the records ARA members manage, preserve, and keep.

Working in collaboration with groups and organisations across the record-keeping and cultural sectors is one of the ways in which ARA recognises that it can create lasting change. In response to Dabiri’s (2019) report, ARA took the lead in lobbying the U.K. Archives Services Accreditation Committee (AAC) to promote increased focus on diversity and inclusion as part of the Archive Service Accreditation process. The ARA Board instructed its representative on the AAC to ask that diversity and inclusion be fully integrated into the standard. The U.K. Archive Services Accreditation Committee has now accepted this and will be publishing its plans shortly.

In early June 2020, the ARA, along with membership bodies across U.K. museums, galleries, heritage, and archives, signed a Joint Statement of Intent for the heritage sector (ARA, 2020) calling for an end to racism in the heritage sector. This work cuts across all aspects of the record-keeping sector—from the archives that are collected, curated, and preserved and the people who make up the archival workforce, to the evidence, accountability, research, and engagement our collections provide.

ARA is also facilitating conversations through its ARA Together Online Community.<sup>5</sup> ARA Together is both an online support hub and a free online community where individuals (not just ARA members) can chat with each other and share openly via text, voice chat, and video.<sup>6</sup> Fortnightly calls provide an opportunity to speak to each other about the latest challenges and developments in the sector. ARA Together aims to support and connect individuals with each other regularly

and learn from one another as a community, sharing experiences, advice, and examples of best practice. In May 2020, ARA planned to host the first of a series of ARA Together calls on the subject of racism in archives in the following month.

Since 2015, the ARA has partnered with TNA and the Scottish Council on Archives on Skills for the Future projects which aim to improve the diversity of the profession. The current project is the “Bridging the Digital Gap Traineeships” in England and ARA hopes that these alternative routes into the profession will have a positive impact on making the sector more inclusive (The National Archives, n.d.).

ARA, along with others in the sector, including TNA and CILIP, has played a key role in the development of the Level 3 Library, Information and Archive Services apprenticeship in England. ARA is also supporting the emerging Level 7 Archivist and Records Manager apprenticeship in England. ARA’s own Professional Development Programme is open to and welcomes all ARA members, whether academically qualified or not. By removing the barriers for those who have been excluded from university qualification, ARA hopes to help develop a more diverse workforce.

Our description of the activities of the BCA, TNA, and ARA form the broad background to less institutionally led activity, much of it grass roots and less formal in organisation. Our account of these activities begins with an overview of groups that continue to work in this space.

### **Museums Detox, Archives Download and We are Transmission**

In 2014, a group of heritage workers of colour, including Sara Wajid (Museum of London), Miranda Lowe (Natural History Museum) and Sandra Shakespeare (formerly of TNA) among others, set up a network called Museums Detox. This group was established to provide not only a network of support, but also as a space to share practice and experience for heritage workers of colour. Following the rapid growth of Museums Detox, another group was set up for the archives sector, initially administered by Maureen Roberts (London Metropolitan Archives/ BCA). The Archives Download group is not limited to people of colour or to qualified archivists. This group meets to share practice, news, and to offer mutual support.

We are Transmission is a collective of archivists and historians of African heritage working to support and build archives and heritage in and with African diaspora communities. One of its significant activities in the timeframe covered by this article was the 2019 “takeover” during the Archival Education and Research Institute at the University of Liverpool. This takeover sought to highlight and make more visible “the important scholarship that engages with the presences and absences of Black British history” (Archival Education and Research Institute, 2019). This takeover took place over one half day of the conference and presented innovative and affective critical reflection on the intersection of methodologies and practice in particular.

### **Intersectional GLAM CIC**

Intersectional GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) CIC<sup>7</sup> is dedicated to re-imagining archives through an intersectional lens, by dismantling historically colonial and hetero-patriarchal cataloguing, collection, and exhibition practices.

Intersectional GLAM, founded in 2018 by Jass Thethi, began as a simple blog which worked as an

outlet for Jass's feelings of being a minority within the GLAM sector, and using her lived experience and decade of knowledge of working in the sector, Jass outlined practical changes she felt could be made to the sector to establish intersectionality. Through voicing her opinion through the blog and on Twitter, institutions began to reach out as there was a clear need and want to understand how to bring intersectionality into the archival world. Jass took on the title of managing director and principal trainer of Intersectional GLAM, she traveled the United Kingdom to run training sessions on Intersectional Equity, Anti-Racism, and LGBTQIA awareness. Since then, Intersectional GLAM has continued to grow.

In April 2020, an array of online, self-taught courses aimed at GLAM professionals were launched. This currently includes Diversity, Inclusion and Intersectionality Training, Implicit and Unconscious Bias Training, and Transgender Awareness Training. Anti-racism Training was released in November 2020 and Disability Awareness Training will be released in 2021.

Jass also co-hosts Well Spoken Tokens, with Esther Lisk-Carew, a free podcast dedicated to discussions around dismantling white supremacy in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums. Each episode welcomes a guest from the cultural sector to discuss important matters such as decolonisation, disability access, gender variance in archives, and practical ways to support minorities in the sector.

The Intersectional GLAM conference, entitled Disrupt and Empower has been planned for 2021. It is a grassroots conference organised to empower everyone within the sector by centering stories and opinions of overlooked and erased peoples while prioritising accessibility in a LGBTQIA, Transgender, BAME, and disability friendly building. Accessibility is the top priority for Intersectional GLAM, therefore in addition to choosing a location which minimises physical barriers, speakers will be paid and tiered pricing is available to ensure socio-economically diverse participants.

In addition to this ongoing work by Museums Detox, Archives Download, We are Transmission, and Intersectional GLAM CIC, there are some particular events and efforts that feature in the recent history of anti-racist work in the British archives sector. What follows is a description of work by practitioners, archival studies scholars, and students, including work on racism in archival description, curriculum decolonisation, and spaces for critical reading, reflection, and planning.

### Protocols for Describing Racist Records

In 2017, research was conducted at the Liverpool University Centre for Archives Studies (LUCAS) by Alicia Chilcott (2019), looking at the potential for developing protocols for the description of records containing racist terminology. This research sought to encourage better practice in the description of such records, contextualising them through more appropriate and sensitive description, improving their discoverability, and providing content warnings for potentially disturbing materials.

This research was conducted within the context of the Department for Culture, Media & Sport's "Culture White Paper" (DCMS, 2016) and TNA's Archives Unlocked (TNA, 2017) strategic vision for the sector calling for the archives workforce and collections to reflect the full diversity of society. It was felt that in order to improve ethnic diversity in the sector, it was necessary to adopt anti-racist practices in all areas of archival work, creating a sector more respectful of and

sensitive to racialised groups, and more capable of appropriately managing collections that represent these groups. This research focused on description as one area for improvement, establishing specific actions and changes that could be taken.

Additionally, this research included an assessment of existing common practice in the United Kingdom and compared them to the descriptive methods recommended by protocols developed in North America and Australia for the culturally sensitive description of archival records about indigenous communities (ATSILIRN, 2012; First Archivist Circle, 2007). These protocols recommend actions ranging from smaller practical changes—such as using subject indexing to improve discoverability or adding content warnings to sensitive records—to broader, more long-term processes such as engaging relevant communities in descriptive processes in a sustained participatory approach and improving cultural awareness among archive staff.

Applying these ideas to the U.K. context, some initial recommendations were proposed within a scalable format of good, better, and best practice, with the aim of identifying those actions that are more easily achievable with minimal resourcing as well as the more long-term and complex processes to be worked towards (Chilcott, 2019).

On 9 May 2018, a meeting was held at LUCAS, organised by James Lowry of the University of Liverpool, and facilitated by Arike Oke and Simon Demissie then both of Wellcome Collection, to discuss the practicability of these recommendations and what form U.K. descriptive protocols might take. The discussions focused on the questions “What would following these recommendations look like for your archive?” and “What support and resources would your archive need to achieve this?”.

The discussions concluded that resourcing and institutional buy-in were the main barriers to the success of this work. The following issues were highlighted as key areas of focus: training, internal engagement and stakeholder management, community engagement, the need to develop a subject thesaurus of preferred terms, the need for an intersectional approach, and acknowledging all forms of marginalisation and misrepresentation present in our collections. The meeting also facilitated the formation of a network of professionals who were keen to contribute to this work.

A working group was formed, including representation from the archives profession, academia, and organisations such as Museums Detox, TNA, and the British Records Association and was chaired by Simon Demissie and Alicia Chilcott. From an initial working group meeting in October 2018, and subsequent discussions, the group identified the aims of this work: to develop practicable protocols for description of racist archive materials, and to encourage improved practice in the U.K. sector. These initial discussions have prioritised and highlighted the following issues:

- Funding: exploring options to fund the development of protocols and allowing for fair payment for people’s time and expertise
- Researching and building on previous efforts by learning from the Australian and North American examples but also from previous work within the United Kingdom, including the work of the Black and Asian Studies Association and the CASBAH project (UK Web Archive, 2014)

- International best practice: establishing what anti-racist archival practice, and in particular description, looks like and drawing on positive examples
- Engagement: this was recognised to encompass internal engagement to gather institutional support, sector engagement to raise awareness, develop a network to inform and test ideas, and community engagement to ensure the protocols reflect the needs and views of communities of colour that use and are represented by archives

Whilst some practical aspects of this work are fairly easily achievable, the protocols developed in Australia and North America have required a level of engagement that the U.K. sector has not historically managed to commit to. Previous work in this area has received limited or short-term support, showing that the sustainability of such efforts relies not only on individual action but a wider cultural change and dedication across the sector. This work is ongoing, but progress has been slowed by the usual drawbacks of individually led efforts such as this—namely the changing availability of those involved and capacity to take on the additional workload. Institutional backing would be beneficial in securing a sustainable approach that does not rely solely on the efforts of individuals.

Nevertheless, work at University College London (UCL) has also been led by individual academics and students.

### **Critical Archives and Records Reading Group and Decolonising the Master's Curriculum (UCL)**

The Critical Archives and Records Reading Group was an initiative led by PhD students and early career researchers Kirsty Fife, Victoria Hoyle, Hannah Smyth, and Hannah Ishmael between 2019 and 2020. The group met on a monthly basis during term time to discuss intersectional approaches to archival theory, beginning in January 2019 with a session that explored white supremacy in archival practice and utilised Michelle Caswell's (2017) "Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives" exercise to encourage attendees to think about the ways in which white privilege manifests through archival processes. Following this session, future events explored queering recordkeeping, feminism in the archives, critical heritage and commemoration, disability studies and archives, and DIY cultural heritage amongst other themes. Whilst our readings predominantly drew on archival theory, we also explored alternative sources including blogs and zines, such as "Archiving the Underground" (Brager & Sailor, 2010).

We sought to create a space for academics, students, and practitioners to critically discuss archival principles and practices, with ambitions to:

- Encourage reflection on the current state of archives and recordkeeping practice and research using critical approaches from across humanities and social science disciplines.
- Share knowledge, experiences, and challenge and confront assumptions in a safe, open environment.
- Discuss practical goals and actions as educators, researchers, and practitioners to generate change.
- Participate in the "societal grand challenge" of the transformation of archival and

recordkeeping practices in pursuit of a more just and equitable world (Gilliland, 2015).

The establishment of a reading group was designed to be an opportunity for ongoing critical learning and thinking beyond the scope of formal archival education—whilst the group was hosted by UCL staff and students, it existed independently of postgraduate programmes in the department. The group also sought to share its learning and reading suggestions by publishing the reading list online for those unable to attend physically. The independence of the reading group is a significant point to note, given the persistent debates about the central role of postgraduate education in the archive profession (Henthorn & Fife, 2018; see Fife & Henthorn in this issue) and how this intersects with the whiteness of information sector workers in the United Kingdom as demonstrated by CILIP and ARA's (2015) report "A Study of the UK Information Workforce: Mapping the Library, Archives, Records, Information Management and Knowledge Management and Related Professions". Providing a free space for critical thinking was useful for both professionals seeking to keep up-to-date with developments in archival theory, and to provide access to materials to those otherwise unable to afford to undertake an Master of Arts in the department. The attendees of the group were predominantly archive workers, which demonstrated the value of creating spaces for ongoing critical development before and after postgraduate courses.

The discussions raised questions about the nature of records and archives, the foundations and principles which underpin archival practice (for example, preservation, public/private access, stability, gatekeeping, and custody), collections development practices, dynamics between institutional and community-led heritage, and the make-up of the archive profession. In various ways, everyday activism within the archival profession emerged as a concern of the group, and the group agreed that systemic inequalities and inequities must be tackled from within and without. Group participants asked themselves how they could translate their reflections into their workplaces and research environments: how could they empower themselves and others in the field to talk about and address these critical concerns? And how can they transform practices in a way that does not appropriate or remarginalise, that recognises the intellectual contributions of scholars and practitioners outside the archival canon, historically and in the present? Using reflexivity as a central tenet, attendees were encouraged to build actions and share experiences to encourage the application of these ideas within workplaces and community heritage projects.

While these conversations were happening, archival studies academics were re-evaluating how UCL prepares its students for archival work. In 2018, the Masters in Archives and Records Management Programme was challenged to examine its teaching through a decolonial lens as part of a UCL wide push to decolonise the curriculum. Areas that were considered under this evaluation exercise included the subject areas embedded in the course, the balance of readings and perspectives introduced to the students, the balance of voice in the delivery of content, and teaching arrangements including aspects such as how students were allocated to group work and encouraged to engage with course content. This review revealed the need for shifts to be made across these aspects, and work to do so began with a revision of the main archival theory module underpinning the programme "Concepts & Contexts" which runs across two terms and has the highest grade weighting attached to it out of all the modules. The review revealed the centrality of a particular "white, founding father" narrative of the development of archival theory and practice, and in particular the central prominence given over to considering the conceptual framework around records and archives offered by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, who was himself a civil servant whose life and work, as Hannah Ishmael (2019) illustrates, was tethered to the very heart of English colonial administration. Whilst it has long been the concern of the course to offer

counter-perspectives and alternative viewpoints to the Jenkinsonian position on archives, recent changes have sought to further shift the balance of power to ensure that Jenkinson's theories are present but no longer untouchable foundational anchors in the way that archival theory and practice is taught at UCL. New routes were created into thinking about what records and archives have been introduced at an earlier stage in the course including introducing new conceptual anchors such as Stuart Hall for the students to wrap their growing understandings around. The reading list has been revised and expanded to better represent the rich emerging scholarship from Black archivists and activists in our field, and the balance across international borders has also been revisited. Self-reflection as a key skill, and enabler to developing understanding, has been deeply embedded in the ways in which the course unfolds and the coursework is framed. New exercises in seminars have encouraged students to consider their cultural backgrounds and be aware and open to learning from each other. Intersectional examination of privilege has also taken shape in group exercises. These first steps towards shifting the course will continue to be refined and worked on over the coming years.

The UCL and Liverpool courses are the two oldest archival science post-graduate courses in the United Kingdom, and while UCL moved through a formal decolonial revision of its curriculum, changes in the Liverpool curriculum have been less systematic. Some of the most recent changes followed an activity held in March 2019.

### **Dismantling White Supremacy at The Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies**

On 6 March 2019, the Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies (LUCAS) ran Michelle Caswell's (2017) "Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives" exercise. The meeting was attended by a small group of people, including practitioners, historians, archival educators, and students. The exercise calls for the group to read Peggy McIntosh's 50 White Privileges (McIntosh, 2010). Following this reading, there was a discussion of the additional or different white privileges experienced in the United Kingdom. This discussion included blind spots in white British versions of history, particularly in the popular imagination, where Britain has not had (racial) segregation laws and tends to cast itself as the hero of the anti-slavery campaign rather than the greatest beneficiary of the slave trade. Structural racism and other legacies of slavery can more easily be dismissed as being American problems because of this mythologising. The resulting dismissal of racism as a lesser problem here in Britain is a specifically British white privilege.

The discussions also considered that the United Kingdom has never been a "mother of exiles", crying "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore". British white privilege may therefore include a greater sense of entitlement to "belonging" to a motherland with an indigenous culture that might be seen as rightly dominant (with implications for archives). This may feed into racism and xenophobia.

Within this discussion, distinctions were made between racism and xenophobia: The racial hierarchy created by British colonialism that survives through the concept of a Commonwealth "family"; some BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) people can be more "foreign" and less welcome in Britain than others while some "foreign" cultural signifiers (including cultural practices, attire, and accents) become welcome reminders of the glory of Britain's Empire. This dynamic of xenophobia can further diminish the recognition of racism.



Finally, the discussion acknowledged the stratification of whiteness in the United Kingdom, thinking about the prominence of class in British culture, the devalued labour of Eastern Europeans, and the othering of Roma and Irish traveller communities—within white privilege there are hierarchies of privilege.

Turning to white privileges in archives, the discussion identified numerous privileges. In the area of description, examples included “I am confident that I will find records that support dominant narratives about ‘my’ national history/ies” and “I am confident that I can find records about people of my race without having to use fuzzy search strategies, different forms of spelling or derogatory search terms”. Regarding access, identified privileges included “I am confident that, as a white person, I will be granted full access to archival resources in any environment” and “When I visit an archive, I will see people of my colour represented in embedded outreach activities”. The discussion specifically addressed record-making in addition to archival considerations. Here privileges were identified such as “I am confident that the records protecting my rights will be available to me” and “I am confident that the design of processes and systems of data capture will accommodate my records needs”. Numerous privileges were acknowledged in the area of appraisal and selection, including “I am confident that I will find records relating to my ancestors in a public records office” and “I can challenge appraisal and selection decisions in my workplace without appearing biased”. White privileges in archival education included “I am confident that the authors on my reading lists will be from my race” and “I am aware of archives as a career option”.

With these privileges in mind, several commitments were made. The archival educators in the room committed to run the exercise annually with students, build links with representatives of diverse communities to give paid talks about their record-keeping traditions, analyse and diversify reading lists, and find records representing the diversity of the U.K. population as examples for the teaching of early modern palaeography. The exercise also prompted the creation of “Widening Participation Workshops”, which offered fully funded workshops for BAME people seeking pre-qualification experience (a prerequisite for admission to archival science degrees in the United Kingdom). The student archivists committed to run the “Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives” exercise in their workplaces when in a position to do so.

The practitioners at the meeting undertook to do the exercise at the next meeting of ARA’s regional training officers and to encourage the training officers to run the exercise in their regions, write about the experience in the ARA magazine, explore how white supremacy could be surfaced and discussed during Archives Hour (which would take place on 31 October 2019), discussing, within ARA, the possibility of reflecting these discussions in the criteria of the Archives Accreditation scheme, and attempting to get the exercise offered at the ARA conference in 2019. This latter action would not materialise, and instead, ARA 2019 became a defining moment in the racism of the sector.

## ARA 2019

In this section we refer to one specific incident of racism that happened during the 2019 Archives and Records Association conference. This example is used to explore the ways in which white supremacy manifests in professional spaces but is far from the *only* instance that has occurred over recent years. The description of this event is used to illustrate the way in which professional spaces and networks are often unsafe for people of colour due to a lack of commitment to anti-racist action and accountability practices. For the purposes of this article, all involved in the

incident have been anonymised.

Professional spaces within the information sector have been described as uncomfortable spaces for people of colour—these include conferences (as in the below example), but also workplaces, sector networks, and education spaces (Espinal, 2001; Espinal et al., 2018; Neal, 1996; Ramirez, 2015; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017; Thethi, 2018). In the context of conferences, Jass Thethi (2018) has highlighted how the language of diversity can be alienating, draining, and othering to people of colour within the profession,

If this presentation were aimed at me the speaker would not use words like “Ne[gr]o” and “Coloured”. If this presentation was for me I would feel safe in the knowledge that if I felt discomfort leaving would not cause offence. If this presentation was for me I would not feel words like “diversity” and “community group” other me from the profession I am in, but paint me as an outsider. If it was all with marginalised groups in mind, I would not leave feeling emotionally drained with at least 10 stories of racial microaggressions. (para. 6)

This is echoed by academics writing about diversity within the context of universities (Ahmed, 2017; Musser, 2015).

In 2019, during the ARA conference a person of colour shared, via social media, concerns that they were the only person of colour present at the conference. This comment was replied to by a senior officer at ARA, who dismissed the individual’s concerns. What followed was a public “debate” in which a senior white man continued to minimise and refute valid issues that were raised by someone who had felt repeatedly othered in the conference space. Because of the use of the conference hashtag, this social media conversation was observed by a high number of conference attendees and archive sector workers. Subsequently, some users began to express support and solidarity to the attendee with the original concerns, and others dismissed the concerns and displayed defensive behaviour that centred the discomfort of white people. This can be understood as the display of “White fragility” (DiAngelo, 2019).

Following the events of ARA 2019, a statement was issued by ARA which confirmed that the employee in question would be resigning their post. The statement said:

I would like to apologise to members and others for any offence caused by social media activity last Saturday 31st August 2019. The tweets concerned do not represent the views of the ARA or its governing Board. (Magee, 2019)

Whilst the decision to leave a professional post for these actions was appropriate, the conference participant who made the initial tweet received no updates or support from the ARA and was left to discover this information from various news sources. Furthermore, when it was discussed with them, they were asked to provide ARA with consultancy services around changes that could be made within ARA to increase diversity, with no compensation for their labour.

The ARA’s actions and comments can be criticised for employing distancing rhetorical devices (Barnes et al., 2001) to attach racism to the actions of one individual rather than also acknowledge the racism embedded in the structure of a professional body in which that individual was employed. This strategy suggests that white supremacy can be “solved” by removing an individual who has behaved inappropriately, rather than holding a body to account and seeking

to transform its behaviours and structures. ARA's dismissal of the need for communication and emotional support, combined with subsequent expectations of assistance from those most affected in this scenario, shows a lack of understanding of the emotional damage that can be caused by racist incidents.

The following year's conference, which has subsequently been postponed due to COVID-19, was originally planned to focus on diversity. This decision was also criticized, as no public communications indicated any actions were taken to improve accessibility to the conference (for instance, by lowering pricing for attendance), or to embed accountability agreements or safer spaces policy to support those who have previously felt marginalised within the space.

Following ARA 2019, there were animated discussions within the profession but many of them were private, and in the public professional fora there was a kind of tense silence, as seen in the hesitation to engage in Archive Hour that October.

### Archive Hour

At the Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives meeting in Liverpool, Pauline Soum-Paris suggested working with ARA to host an Archive Hour on the topic of white supremacy in the sector. Archive Hour is an hour-long Twitter conversation that happens on the last Thursday of each month hosted by one of nine ARA nations, regions, or sections plus a guest host, using #archivehour in each post.

In a demonstration of ARA North West's ongoing support for the anti-racist agenda, they readily agreed to the proposal to discuss "Power, Diversity and Inclusion" during their next turn at hosting on 31 October 2019. The following questions were asked:

1. We are living in a moment when inherited power structures, and the ideas that support them, are being challenged. What tools are available to help us critically think about racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression in the archival profession?
2. Fighting white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in archives involves critically re-examining our intellectual history and telling different stories about our profession. Which 'other' writers belong in the archival canon?
3. Jenkinson's Manual is getting an overhaul. What should it include? What are the most important changes in archival theory in the last 100 years?
4. Power imbalances happen locally and globally. Despite requests since the 1960s for the Migrated Archive to be returned, they're still in UK custody. Do you work with collections whose custody constitutes a power imbalance?
5. At the @livuniLUCAS annual archives lecture this year, @ArikeOke suggested that we didn't all need to strive to do appraisal in the same way. How do you think about your positionality in appraisal and selection? How do you check personal bias or prejudice?
6. Following @aliciachilcott's research into the description of #racistrecords, work has been going on around protocols for describing offensive records. How do you deal with racist, sexist and phobic language in records? How do you describe offensive material?

7. In your design and delivery of services, how do you think about access and ableism? What's best practice in this area? Is there enough about diffability in archives accreditation requirements?
8. The #ARAGlasgowManifesto responds to concerns about diversity and inclusion. Do you think it goes far enough? What would you like to see it include?
9. There has been a lot of discussion about barriers to and access routes into the profession. How can we empower a diverse and representative profession?
10. What did you read in 2019 that changed how you think about power, diversity or inclusion in archival work?

In the aftermath of ARA 2019, the discussions were muted, with the Archive Hour coordinator reporting that engagement was lower than usual. Those involved felt that this reflected anxiety about discussing the topic in general, and particularly on social media, rather than a lack of interest in or concern for the topic. The reticence of colleagues to speak publicly about these issues spurred numerous conversations locally.

### Meetings in London, Liverpool, and St Andrews

Following ARA 2019, and the low engagement with Archive Hour, conversations in informal professional networks across the north west of England began to galvanise into action, and a meeting was planned at the Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies. Similar meetings were planned for London and St Andrews. Taking place on 12 December 2019, the meetings were attended by archivists who expressed disillusionment with the sector and sector leaders in the fallout of ARA 2019, experiences of exclusion, and awareness of personal responsibility to effect change in the profession. Through these meetings, the following problems were articulated.

**White Fragility:** The profession struggles to acknowledge that white supremacy exists in the United Kingdom because of:

- A lack of awareness of what structural racism is
- An instinctive defensiveness and denial of white privilege
- An unwillingness to accept the lived experience and testimony of those who are negatively affected by white privilege.

These patterns of denial, defensiveness and minimisation can also be seen in relation to other characteristics such as gender, class, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

**Leadership:** There is a lack of action, leadership and accountability from professional associations and other sector leaders. There is a sense that they are not listening, that their priorities in this area are unclear, and that their decision-making mechanisms are opaque. There is very limited diversity at the highest levels of the profession and those at the top seem disconnected from the problem.

**Awareness of Heritage and the Archives Profession:** The fact that our school curricula and dominant historical narratives centre the white, largely middle-class British experience engages

those who are 'interested' (and over-represented), which perpetuates a white, middle-class workforce. In turn, this reinforces our perceptions of our profession as an insular and exclusive one, which is not representative of many, many people and histories.

**Barriers to Qualification and Precarity in Work:** There are barriers to entering the profession of finance, geography, access to technology, academic requirements, and lack of paid traineeships. Current/previous efforts to reduce these barriers haven't been effective. In order to achieve diversity in ethnicity, class and economic background, consideration should be made of the amount of money required to gain work experience, pay student fees etc. Funding is needed for paid placements, and the profession is suffering from a lack of long-term roles.

To address these problems, the following actions were identified.

#### **Individual actions we will take at our organisations and in our practice**

- Be braver. Critically examine ourselves and our assumptions and biases. Find out what our unconscious biases are.
- Listen more. Listen to the lived experiences of others. Listen to communities. Create spaces for conversations about race and representation, power and social justice.
- Speak out at work. Support colleagues experiencing racism and other prejudices.
- Educate ourselves. Read some critical race theory. Make learning opportunities for ourselves and others. Take advantage of free training programmes from charities for staff. Use the Archivists Against<sup>8</sup> collective's resources in our workplaces.
- Connect. Seek allies and commit to allyship. Work with more diverse networks.
- Reassess acquisitions and collecting policies. What is valued and who is being represented?
- Critically rethink our tools and techniques. How are we cataloguing? Which records are prioritised for cataloguing?
- Look at our own operations. Are our values embedded in our procedures, hiring practices, corporate language, etc?
- Think historically, and think globally. Acknowledge colonial legacies. White supremacy is built into and on our collections and helps to determine our place in the international archival community.
- Pay up, and pay forward. Commit to finding funds to pay trainees. Recruit trainees who have the potential to change our profession for the better.
- Celebrate positive action, loudly.

#### **Action will we take collectively to influence the sector**

- Support and participate in current ARA and The National Archives efforts to address

- structural racism in the profession. Insist that these efforts are expanded or continued until structural racism is eliminated.
- Ask ARA to appoint paid advisors to conduct a thorough internal review of its structure, culture, and practices to discover what needs to change within the organisation to make it a safer, more inclusive professional body.
  - Insist that all accreditation guidelines, competency frameworks, etc surface and work to correct structural biases.
  - Recognise that British archives hold records that don't belong to us. Through ARA and The National Archives, do something about that.
  - Support the work around descriptive protocols for racist records.
  - Expect the university courses to decolonise their curricula and reassess the skills they teach, with a greater focus on human-centred approaches and skills for challenging and speaking up, handling difficult conversations and conflicting perspectives.
  - Support alternative routes into the profession that diversify the sector, without de-professionalising it.
  - Work to positively influence primary and secondary school history curricula so that historical research and archives are opened up to those presently disengaged and excluded through white hegemony.
  - Participate in these efforts instead of expecting others to do the work for us.

These actions were posted on an online site<sup>9</sup> and archivists were invited to sign as a public commitment to action on structural racism. Uptake was initially low, confined mainly to people who had attended the December meetings, until the toppling of Colston's statue in June 2020 prompted a heated conversation on the professional list-serv. This conversation prompted a surge in signatures to the statement, cancellations of ARA membership subscriptions, and the establishment of an "activist archivist" Discord channel.

### Conclusion

This brings the history up to date until June 2020, just before a new burst of energy against structural racism in the sector. We do not know if the anti-racist energy we can see in the profession as we write this will hold, or if it will come to anything at all, but it feels like there has been more progress than ever before. But as this article makes clear, there is work to be done to understand the history of racism and anti-racist work in our sector; while our account is fairly comprehensive for the short period it covers, much previous work is less fully documented at present.

The future is just as unclear. The profession can no longer claim ignorance of the issue of racism, but for those who recognise it as a problem, what next? Statements, action plans, manifestos, and strategies have proliferated in these past few years, and all outline more or less useful actions. There is a very real risk that the current energy will flag if the talking and statement-

making do not start to translate into the implementation of these action points and undertakings.

How to avoid “representational politics”? The problem statements and proposed actions in the document drafted after the December 2019 meetings recognise that organisational policies for diversity and inclusion, and fast-tracking BAME people into positions of visibility, do little to dismantle the structural biases that support the current white hegemony of the British archives sector (Change.org, n.d.). Honma’s (2005) arguments against tokenisation and for Chu’s (1999) “social and color consciousness” tell us how that goes. The colour consciousness Chu (1999) discusses is deeply personal, beginning with examinations of personal privilege and bias. To return to Honma (2005), “The identification of whiteness and its structuralizing principles is necessary in order to combat its invisibility and normative effects” (p.5).

It is not enough to watch—like the trepidation around October 2019’s Archive Hour—and wait for professional bodies and other sector leaders to fix racism in the sector. Our overview of recent developments shows a turn to grassroots action, particularly after the 2019 ARA conference. Though TNA and ARA must, and are continuing to grapple with, the interconnected issues that keep U.K. archives in the grip of whiteness, the shift towards personal responsibility and action must continue if things are to change.

We cannot fight racism in a profession without understanding ourselves, as its members, in terms of race. Those of us who operate in these predominantly white spaces as people of colour, know that while the fight is long and progress is slow, we are not alone, and our strength and value will continue to grow through solidarity. And we can look to a future where white supremacy is dismantled and our history no longer sits invisible or on the margins, but as well-funded central narratives taught to all children. As we work to manifest this future, we welcome strategic and structural changes alongside our white allies. Those of us who are white must see what our society has made invisible—our own colour and its attendant privileges—our “birthrights”, and all the expectations and assumptions surfaced in Caswell’s (2017) exercise. McIntosh (2009) has called us to understand white racial history and how it has brought us to today’s status quo. We will not see real change until we understand how it came to be this way and how all the pieces fit together. Then we can take it apart.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In England some buildings are “listed”, which refers to the practice of listing buildings and sites of historic interest in order to confer certain protections on those sites. “Grade II\* listed” buildings are “particularly important buildings of more than special interest”, comprising 5.8% of listed buildings (Historic England, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Black Cultural Archives on Google: Arts & Culture:  
<https://artsandculture.google.com/project/black-cultural-archives>.

<sup>3</sup> Nutkhut is a London-based performance company. Their project Girit “aims to highlight the centenary of the abolishment of indentured labour and the 50th anniversary of the Independence of Fiji, to inform the public of this neglected part of British history, which remains relatively unknown outside of academic circles” (Nutkhut, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/category/podcasts-2/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.archives.org.uk/ara-together/ara-together-online-community.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The conversation is held on a Discord server: Dismantling oppressive practices, Archives and

Records Association Discord channel. Visit:

<https://discord.com/channels/704677916612493332/734684971071176785>.

<sup>7</sup> CIC is the abbreviation for the company type: “community interest company”. A community interest company is a type of company introduced by the U.K. government in 2005 under the Companies Act 2004, designed for social enterprises that want to use their profits and assets for the public good.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.archivistsagainst.org>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.archives.org.uk/publications/workforce.html>.

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