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The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking Expressions of Hostility:

Executive Summary 2

This Executive Summary report is part of a series of publications produced as part of *The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside*. Our full range of reports relating to this project are listed below and can be accessed at:

<https://le.ac.uk/hate-studies/research>

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Full Report 1

Unpacking Expressions of Hostility: Full Report 2

Unpacking the Backlash: Full Report 3

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Executive Summary 1

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Unpacking the Backlash: Executive Summary 3

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Executive Summary: Unpacking Expressions of Hostility

The English countryside is often romanticised as a space of timeless beauty, peace, cultural heritage, and imagined community. Yet this landscape also holds histories of exclusion, routes of displacement, and enduring systems of inequality. Racism in rural areas is frequently overlooked, often treated either as an urban issue or a thing of the past. This report shows how racism in the countryside is lived, structured, sustained, and actively resisted. It unpacks the historic, cultural and symbolic dimensions of rural racism and explores how exclusion takes root not only in behaviour but in the traditions, cultural practices and legal frameworks that shape rural life.

Drawing on close collaboration with 20 community research partners and using creative writing, arts-informed methods and participant interviews we investigated how racism is embedded in heritage practices, the built environment, cultural memory, and everyday human encounters. These creative investigations also surfaced expressions of resistance: acts of reimagining and reclaiming that speak to the possibility of more inclusive rural futures.

This report responds to a series of myths about the English countryside that our study found to be widely expressed. These myths shape public assumptions about who belongs, whose histories are acknowledged, what kinds of relationships are seen as legitimate, and how rural life is imagined. They are not simply misunderstandings. They function as cultural narratives that uphold exclusion and invisibility. Our community research partners and participants, through their creative expressions and interview testimonies, present a challenge to these enduring myths.

Myth One: minoritised communities have no respect or affinity with the countryside

This myth dismisses the deep connections that minoritised communities hold with rural Britain, from finding selfhood on a Welsh mountain to drawing on memories of Kashmir in the Lake District. Such reflections reveal that rural belonging is consciously made through memory, migration, ancestry and lived reality.

Recommendations:

- Listen carefully to expressions of joy, memory and connection to rural place.
- Recognise rural belonging as plural and lived rather than inherited or owned.
- Value the stories, care and cultural life that minoritised communities bring to the countryside.

Myth Two: racism in the countryside is a figment of people's imagination

This myth questions the validity of racist experience as 'they didn't mean it like that' 'or there's no racism here', overlooking subtle refusals of hospitality, slow service,

impersonal gestures and disapproving looks that communicate exclusion as clearly as overt abuse yet evade admissible proof. Acknowledging these coded incivilities alongside explicit slurs is essential to recognise and address personal and structural actions that sustain denial.

Recommendations:

- Name the subtle forms of racism beyond overt abuse: silences, stares and remarks that signal 'you don't belong here'.
- Validate and respect lived experience even when harm is difficult to document and its impact easy to dismiss.
- Listen with care to those who navigate ambiguity and carry the accumulated knowledge of being doubted or quietly excluded.

Myth Three: there are no genuine barriers to accessing the countryside

This myth suggests that countryside access is simply a matter of personal choice, overlooking the structural, interpersonal and material factors that shape who can truly participate in rural life. When barriers such as transport or lack of culturally appropriate food go unaddressed, exclusion becomes routine. By framing exclusion as cultural disinterest rather than inequality, this myth renders systemic barriers invisible.

Recommendations:

- Identify and address obstacles that limit access to rural spaces such as, transport, clothing, cost and practical know how.
- Collaborate with local businesses and visitor centres to expand food offerings and amenities that accommodate and provide for diverse dietary and cultural practices.
- Provide clear signage, maps and guidance to support navigation and planning for visitors unfamiliar with rural environments.

Myth Four: forming Black and Muslim walking groups is unnecessary and divisive

This myth paints the creation of Black and Muslim walking groups as needless or divisive, overlooking their role in responding to real exclusions within mainstream outdoor culture. Affinity initiatives such as Black Girls Hike, Muslim Hikers and Peaks of Colour cultivate spaces of joy, cultural expression, safety and community.

Recommendations:

- Recognise the value of affinity walking groups as spaces of care, cultural expression and safety for minoritised and faith-based communities.
- Encourage mainstream walking groups to engage proactively with minoritised and faith-based participants.
- Support the autonomy of Black, Muslim and other minoritised people to define their own relationships with rural space.

Myth Five: minoritised people always play the victim

This myth casts minoritised people in rural settings as oversensitive, interpreting their accounts of harm as personal grievance rather than legitimate critique. The creative contributions of our partners and participants affirm dignity, connection, belonging and strength through acts of remembrance and resistance.

Recommendations:

- Acknowledge that naming injustice is an act of voice, not an invitation to play the victim.
- Support creative expression as a valid form of truth telling, empowerment, resistance and joy.
- Create and promote platforms for nuanced storytelling that reflect the complexity and agency of minoritised experiences.
- Challenge expectations that minoritised people remain silent in exchange for acceptance.

Myth Six: Rural history is White history

This myth imagines the countryside as untouched by empire, erasing the presence of minoritised communities and colonial entanglements. Archival and creative work by our collaborators reveal how rural lives have been shaped by colonial labour and migration.

Recommendations:

- Reveal colonial contexts in heritage interpretation, using plaques, trails and exhibits to credit enslaved and colonised labour.
- Incorporate diasporic foodways and agricultural knowledge into museum displays, community gardens and local festivals.
- Support community-led archives, poetry and art projects that recover lives omitted from official records.
- Co-curate research and exhibitions with minoritised partners, ensuring their perspectives guide how rural history is told.

Myth Seven: Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are a scourge on our countryside

This myth casts Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities as damaging outsiders, ignoring their long-standing contributions to rural economies, ecologies, traditions, oral histories and everyday labour. Their exclusion is not accidental but built into laws, policies, practices and cultural assumptions.

Recommendations:

- Update rural heritage narratives and museum exhibits to acknowledge how Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers have enriched the countryside through crafts, grazing traditions and seasonal trades.
- Reform planning and legal frameworks to remove bans on traditional sites and affirm the right to nomadic life for Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.
- Partner with Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller organisations to co-design public art, educational programmes and local policies that both celebrate traditions and challenge hostile architecture.

Myth Eight: White rural residents are all racist

This myth, sometimes attributed to false narratives presented by research into issues of race and rurality, assumes that all White rural residents are complicit in racism, ignoring acts of solidarity, hospitality and shared struggle. The evidence from our research suggests that solidarity in rural areas often takes the form of quiet sustained commitments rather than headline-grabbing gestures.

Recommendations:

- Acknowledge and support grassroots solidarity by funding community-run spaces where White and minoritised people come together over shared projects and open conversation.
- Embed ethical accountability in rural history and heritage projects by inviting White researchers and institutions to trace and disclose their connections to colonial and racial violence.
- Foster sustained allyship by creating rural networks that offer training, peer support and resources for White residents committed to anti-racist action in their communities.



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