UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking Expressions of Hostility: Full Report 2

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Content Warning

This report contains hate speech, abusive language and references to racism which individuals may find offensive or distressing.

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- Devon Development Education
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- Black Voices Cornwall
- Black Girls Hike
- Tiny Travels Cultural Education CIC
- British Trust for Ornithology
- Black Body Heart Mind Consultancy
- Anti-Racist Cumbria
- Furness Multicultural Community Forum
- Portland Global friendship Group

Your commitment to equity, inclusion and racial justice in rural spaces is an inspiration, and your partnership has enriched this research in countless ways. Finally, we acknowledge all those working, often quietly and without thanks, to challenge racism and build belonging in rural communities across the country.

This report is dedicated to you.

Thank you.

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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Introduction

Background to the project

This report summarises the findings of *The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside* (2023-2025), funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The project seeks to re-story popular depictions of rural life by challenging urban-centric frameworks for understanding the nature and impacts of racism, which are routinely overlooked, minimised and unchallenged.

Although rural racism is discussed in the media,[1] it remains under-researched and poorly understood. Foundational studies from the early 2000s[2] provide a starting point, but much has changed in the decades since. The COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in work-life patterns, and the rising appeal of rural living have led to increasing diversity in some countryside areas. Yet persistent inequalities remain. People from minoritised groups continue to be underrepresented both as rural residents and as visitors. Barriers including the rising cost of living, fears of discrimination, limited cultural visibility, and a lack of inclusive infrastructure restrict access and belonging.

For some communities, like Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, these exclusions are deeply entrenched despite their historical presence within rural England. Portrayals of the countryside as peaceful and apolitical often mask the realities of racism. For many, rural spaces are not easy places to be in, they are exclusionary and contested[3].

At a time when conversations about race and national identity are fraught with tension and division, this project provides an evidence-base to inform public discussion. It explores how rural spaces are being reshaped by inequality and exclusionary behaviours. It places the voices of minoritise individuals at the centre, whether they have deep local roots, have relocated recently, or are just visiting. It is important to note that White rural voices were also sought and included in this report. In doing so, we aim to understand not only how racism manifests, but also how it is rationalised and/or challenged within rural communities. Our approach is deliberately broad, allowing participants to self-define what 'rural' means to them, whether that's a remote hamlet, a market town, or a seasonal tourist spot. In doing so, we aim to reveal the complexities of rural England.

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[1] BBC (2021) 'Muslim hikers say abusive comments won't stop them'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-59812399
Mistlin, A. (2021) 'Racist attack on English Heritage exhibition celebrating black lives'. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/oct/16/racist-attack-on-english-heritage-exhibition-celebrating-black-lives?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

[2] Chakraborti, N. and Garland, J. (2004) *Rural Racism*. Cullompton: Willan.

[3] Collier, B. (2019) 'Black absence in green spaces'. https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces

How prevalent is racism?

Racism remains a common feature of life in contemporary Britain, affecting individuals and communities in both urban and rural settings. According to the Home Office statistics for the year ending March 2024, police in England and Wales recorded 98,799 race hate crimes, making up 70% of all hate crime offences.[4] While this represents a 5% decrease from the previous year, the overall number remains high, and these figures are widely considered under-representative due to underreporting and mistrust of institutions.

Over the course of this research, certain events have underscored the volatility and persistence of racism in the UK. The summer of 2024 saw the most significant social unrest since 2011, with a wave of anti-immigration riots in 27 towns and cities across England and Northern Ireland.[5] These riots, sparked by misinformation and fuelled by far-right groups, targeted mosques, hotels housing asylum seekers, and businesses owned by immigrants. Hundreds were arrested and charged, but the riots left a lasting impact on community trust, a sense of safety, and perceptions of who belongs in the UK.

The broader political climate has also contributed to the normalisation of racist rhetoric, both domestically and further afield. The broader political climate has also contributed to the normalisation of racist rhetoric, both domestically and further afield. In particular, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, the mainstreaming of divisive language[6] and the emboldening of far-right movements continues to have damaging implications for minoritised communities and their sense of security and belonging.

While national narratives often frame racism as an urban issue, this report demonstrates that rural England is by no means immune. In fact, rural contexts can intensify the impacts of racism, creating unique contexts for it to develop. Understanding the nature of racism in rural areas, is essential for developing effective responses to it. This report aims to bring visibility to the lived realities of racism that are too often ignored or dismissed in national conversations, and to situate rural experiences within the wider social and political landscape.

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[4] UK Government (2024) Hate Crime, England and Wales, Year Ending March 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024

[5] House of Commons Library (2024) Policing response to the 2024 summer riots https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/policing-response-to-the-2024-summer-riots/

[6] Keate, N. (2024) Donald Trump emboldened UK racists, says Labour minister https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-united-kingdom-racists-emboldened-angela-eagle/
Senk, K. (2025) Could Trump's Election Bolster Reform UK's Momentum? https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2025/01/24/could-trumps-election-bolster-reform-uks-momentum/

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

The Rural Racism Project is a large-scale research project into the nature of racism in rural spaces in England. Conducted by Prof. Neil Chakraborti, Prof. Corinne Fowler, Dr Amy Clarke, Dr Rachel Keighley, Dr Adrian Yip and Dr Viji Kuppan, and supported by Mulka Nisic, working with numerous contributors, the two-year project (2023-2025) collected data from 115 people, 20 Community Research Partners and eight case studies of online abuse to understand the nature and impacts of racism on minoritised individuals and communities. This report is part of a three-part series which summarises the most significant findings from the project and provides evidence-based insights to challenge racism and make the countryside an inclusive environment for all.

Aims of the project

The study spans three interconnected work strands, each designed to explore a distinct dimension of rural racism. Together, they provide a comprehensive and layered understanding of how it is experienced and expressed in rural contexts.

- To assess the ways in which minoritised groups are included and excluded in rural environments and the impacts that this has on individuals and communities.
- To explore the historical, cultural and symbolic expressions of racism in rural locations through arts-based media to “speak back” to racism and produce more inclusive narratives about rural life.
- To identify the underpinning factors that trigger hostile reactions to the exposure of rural racism through the analysis of public reactions to issues of ‘race’ within rural environments.

The project provides a comprehensive empirical basis for understanding racism in rural spaces, highlighting *why* racism is likely to occur, but also *how* we can prevent racism and make the countryside a more inclusive place. By understanding the nature, impacts and responses to racism, we hope that these reports will provide pathways to effective community and structural responses to racism. Each of the three strands to this project are described below.

Underpinning our approach to each strand is the belief that individuals who experience rural life first-hand, particularly those from racialised and minoritised communities, are uniquely positioned to illuminate the realities of rural racism. Rather than treating participants as mere data sources, this project embraced them as knowledge holders whose lived experiences shaped the research process. Their insights influenced not only the topics discussed but also how findings were interpreted and contextualised within the broader landscape of rural racism. This collaborative approach ensured that

the research remained nuanced and grounded in the everyday realities, challenges and complexities of rural life. Moreover, through an arts-based approach that included creative writing, poetry and photography, participants examined how racism in the countryside is not only experienced socially but embedded in its historical legacies, cultural narratives and symbolic landscapes. These creative practices exposed the ways in which exclusion is woven into rural heritage, while also offering alternative visions of belonging and memory. In doing so, participants did not merely document harm; they actively resisted it, reclaiming rural space as a site of voice and visibility.

1. **Unpacking experiences of hostility**

This strand of research captured the lived experiences of racism in rural environments through 115 semi-structured interviews[7] and informal conversations with minoritised individuals, White rural residents and White allies actively engaged in anti-racist work across England. These participants were recruited through local networks, snowball sampling[8] and community organisations. Their diverse life histories, ethnic backgrounds, geographic locations and relationships to rural spaces provided a rich tapestry of perspectives.

Interviews were conducted both online and in person; some were supplemented by ethnographic walking fieldwork in local areas. Participants shared stories of belonging, exclusion, microaggressions, institutional harm, community support, resilience, resistance, and joy. This strand prioritised everyday experiences of rural life, documenting not only moments of harm but also acts of solidarity and allyship.

2. **Unpacking expressions of hostility**

This strand of the research examined cultural, historic, and symbolic expressions of racism embedded within the English countryside. We recruited 20 community research partners from a range of ethnicities, communities, age groups, and rural settings across England. The community research partners responded to an open call for research volunteers with relevant experience and through snowball sampling. These partners produced a wide range of artistic and reflective work, including poetry, podcasts, film, photography and creative writing. Their contributions were shaped through reflection on personal experience, encounters with rural places and ongoing dialogue with the research team. This strand was complemented by also drawing from interviews and informal conversations with the community research partners and White allies across England. The work revealed how rural spaces can simultaneously

[7] A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method using a pre-prepared list of open-ended questions whilst exploring responses further with probing questions. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of topics, while also ensuring consistency across interviews.

[8] A recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants.

offer welcome and exclusion, and how powerful cultural forms can influence the boundaries of belonging.

3. **Unpacking the backlash**

This strand of investigation explored online discussions about race in rural environments to identify the underpinning factors that trigger hostile reactions to discussing or evidencing rural racism by examining the social strategies deployed to dismiss people's experiences. Methodologically, we focused on analysing public discourse and attitudes towards rural racism and, using #LancsBox and Critical Discourse Analysis, highlighted how language is used to construct, reinforce, or deny racism in rural contexts. The research team collected approximately 193,000 words of user-generated content from news websites (e.g. *Daily Mail*, *Breitbart News*, *The Mirror*) and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, X). Rather than preselecting platforms, the corpus was tailored around eight themed case studies designed to unpack specific examples of the backlash against identifying or addressing racism in the countryside. These themes included the countryside's colonial history, rural identity, gardening, The Muslim Hikers walking group, National Trust controversies, pub names, Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, and the removal of statues.

Together, these three interconnected strands of investigation provide a holistic account of rural racism as (i) experienced in daily life (Unpacking Experiences of Hostility); as (ii) embedded within histories and cultures of the rural (Unpacking Expressions of Hostility); and (iii) as spoken about in public discourse (Unpacking the Backlash). This layered approach enables an intersectional understanding of racism that attends to language, identity, memory and space. This report shares the key findings from the second work stream, Unpacking Expressions of Hostility.

A note on terminology

We recognise that racial and identities are deeply personal, context-dependent, and often fluid. Within this report, individuals may self-identify in ways that reflect a complex interplay of heritage, culture, experience and context which can evolve over time. Terms such as "White," "people of colour," "minoritised communities," "Black," "South Asian," and "Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers," among others, are imperfect.

In this report we have adopted broad categorical terminology to enable meaningful thematic analysis and to reflect common patterns across people's experiences. These categories are used for analytic clarity rather than to essentialise people's identities. Where appropriate, we draw on participants' own descriptions of their identities and we use direct quotations to retain the richness of their perspectives.

We also acknowledge that terms like “minoritised” intentionally highlight the social and structural processes through which groups are marginalised, rather than implying demographic inferiority. Our approach remains sensitive to the evolving nature of language and the importance of allowing space for self-definition.

A note on well-being

To support the research team, we obtained additional funding to appoint a counsellor who could provide specialist support to the research team by facilitating reflective practice meetings which created space for team members to discuss the psychological demands of this work. This support was extended to all of our research participants via opt-in group sessions or face to face individual counselling sessions to discuss anything which had been triggered by recalling memories of racism. This was all key to our overarching priorities around safeguarding and an ethics of care, and part of a wider desire to ensure that neither participants nor researchers should end the project in a worse state of mind than when they began it. It is important, in all cases, to acknowledge the stresses and strains of prolonged exposure to hate speech and negative commentary, a sinister phenomenon worth studying in its own right.

Unpacking Expressions of Hostility

This report unpacks the historic, cultural and symbolic dimensions of rural racism. It explores how exclusion takes root not only in behaviour but in the stories and cultural practices that shape rural life. It will do this through unmasking a series of durable myths related to the countryside. Drawing on the close collaboration with 20 community research partners, using creative writing and arts-informed methods we investigated how racism is woven into heritage practices, landscape meanings, the cultural memory of place and everyday human encounters. This arts-based approach allowed participants to interrogate their place within the countryside and green spaces of the city, not just as a setting, but as a site of meaning-making where colonial histories linger and belonging is contested. These investigations also brought forward expressions of resistance: acts of reimagining and reclaiming that speak to the possibility of more inclusive rural futures. The objectives of this strand of the project were:

- To analyse how racism is communicated through rural symbols, traditions, and public memory.
- To expose how ideas of belonging are constructed and policed.
- To situate lived experiences of exclusion within broader historical and cultural contexts.
- To use creative methods to explore the role of history, dominant rural narratives and how these impact minoritised communities.
- To amplify community-led responses that resist exclusion and re-story the countryside.

What do we mean by historic, cultural and symbolic representations?

> "*The British country house, that symbol of refinement, connoisseurship and civility, has long been regarded not only as the jewel in the nation's heritage crown, but as an iconic signifier of national identity*".[9]

This quote from Dresser and Hann (2013) points to the historic foundations that uphold the symbolic significance of iconic rural heritage sites such as the grand country house. These estates are not just sites that we visit on day trips for recreation and relaxation, but they subtly communicate powerful messages about identity and belonging. For some, they affirm a sense of national pride and heritage. For others, they suggest exclusion, signalling whose history is important and whose remains on the margins. This is the quiet, persistent work that these cultural spaces perform. Of course, there are other kinds of rural sites, all with distinctive meanings, including: ancient monuments, canals, chapels, churches, farms, market towns, rural mills, mines, literary landscapes, memorials, plaques and the village pub. Whilst historic

[9] Dresser, C. and Hann, A. Hann. ed. (2013) *Slavery and the British Country House*. Swindon: English Heritage.

homes links to class privilege and social hierarchy are more widely recognised, what is less well known is that many country estates were expanded and sustained with wealth derived from slavery and empire, embedding colonial exploitation into the very soil of the countryside.

Still, some change is underway. In 2023, Kedleston Hall, once the home of George Curzon, Viceroy of India (1899–1905), and known for its extensive South Asian collections opened a new exhibition entitled, *My Adornment is My Power*. Alongside recontextualising artefacts acquired during empire, the exhibition featured contemporary jewellery by British South Asian artisan Anisha Parmar. Parmar's inspiration stemmed from a diary entry by Mary Curzon, which depicted the Maharani of Jodhpur as a "painted jewelled female prisoner." Parmar challenges this colonial narrative by showcasing jewellery as symbols of empowerment and cultural identity. These interventions gesture toward a more inclusive and participatory approach to heritage interpretation.

However, such efforts continue to provoke resistance. In 2020, when the National Trust published a report[10] detailing the colonial and slavery related histories of properties in its care, it faced a fierce backlash from media[11] and political figures[12]. Jacob Rees-Mogg criticised the National Trust for its portrayal of Winston Churchill, claiming that it failed to recognise Churchill's significant contributions and legacy. Moreover, he expressed disappointment in the Trust for including Winston Churchill's home, Chartwell, in a report detailing properties with links to colonialism and slavery. He asserted, “we should be so proud of our great heroes in this nation like Winston Churchill. And an organisation like the National Trust should be honoured that it has Chartwell amongst its portfolio of properties."[13] However, as has been pointed out, the entry on Chartwell did not mention slavery[14]. This reveals how even a rigorously researched historical report can be distorted or misrepresented. Moreover, it exposes the tension between acknowledgement and denial, illustrating how rural heritage remains a contested cultural and symbolic terrain.

During the 20th century, immigration was primarily directed toward urban centres, yet histories of minoritised people in rural areas, though present, remain marginalised and

[10] Huxtable, S-A., Fowler, C., Kefalas, C. and Slocombe. E. eds. (2020) *Interim report on the connections between colonialism and properties now in the care of the National Trust, including links with historic slavery*. Swindon: National Trust.
[11] Swerling, G. (2020) ‘“Woke” National Trust academic tasked with reviewing colonial past “intimidated” by critics’. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/20/woke-national-trust-academic-tasked-reviewing-colonial-past/
[12] Kaonga, G. (2020) ‘Jacob Rees-Mogg attacks “shameface” National Trust in fiery Winston Churchill row’. https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1339607/Jacob-Rees-Mogg-National-Trust-Winston-Churchill-news-latest-update
[13] Belfast Telegraph https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/rees-mogg-defends-wonderful-churchill-in-national-trust-row/39559257.html
[14] Fowler, C. (2024) ‘My writing on colonialism made me a hate figure – so I replied to my trolls’. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/22/corrine-fowler-national-trust-report-on-colonialism-trolls/

not widely known. Policing in these settings often developed without an understanding of racial dynamics, contributing to environments that could feel unwelcoming or overtly hostile to racialised residents and visitors[15]. Despite the long-standing presence of minoritised populations, the countryside continues to be symbolically coded as White. War memorials, museums, and rural heritage sites frequently omit stories of empire, slavery, indenture, and migration.

Photograph of Basildon Park house from a distance. Basildon Park is a historic country house and estate with links to the East India company. In the foreground of the photograph a dog plays with a ball amongst the buttercup filled parkland.

[15] Chakraborti, N. and Garland, J. eds. (2004) *Rural Racism*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

How might an arts-based approach reimagine the countryside?

Alongside conversations with 115 participants from a range of minoritised and White British backgrounds living, working and visiting rural areas, the Rural Racism Project, as mentioned above, worked with a group of 20 community research partners. These community partners were invited to offer responses to racism in rural locations. Their variously arts-informed and creative contributions, whilst acutely aware of racism's enduring presence in the countryside also help re-claim and re-imagine the presence, hope, creativity and joy of minoritised communities and their allies.

This arts-based research approach was grounded in a commitment to co-production[16] and racial justice. This framework complemented, but also differed from, the social scientific methods used in other parts of the Rural Racism Project. It engaged with creative writing and artistic expression as both mode of enquiry and form of resistance. Arts-based research provided invaluable insights into emotional and social contexts for experiencing racism and its impacts through the symbolic, and imaginative power of creative storytelling and audio-visual forms.[17] These creative processes offered not only a means of storytelling but also a powerful counterforce to the historic, cultural, and often unconscious expressions of racism that have long shaped rural life.

When embedded within a co-productive framework, this methodology was a tool for confronting exclusion and disrupting dominant representations of the countryside as White and homogenous. Through producing articles, blogs, films, photographs, podcasts, poems, and other combined forms of art-based media, community research partners, reimagined places by challenging inherited meanings and remaking places through a creative lens. Rather than documenting rural racism from a distance, these approaches together with interviews and ethnographic[18] insights offered a deeply personal and political mode of intervention. Using this method, we examine how creative practice bears witness to racism whilst also offering a sense of agency and affirmation.

This work took place in a context where rural England is variously imagined as a space of tradition, nostalgia, social harmony and natural beauty, frames that often mask its exclusions. Minoritised people in these environments often experience a double erasure: made hyper-visible through difference and simultaneously invisible in dominant narratives of rural life. The countryside is not just a material or geographic

[16] Co-production in this project meant working alongside community research partners who contributed local knowledge and creative insight enriching the research beyond what academic perspectives alone could offer.

[17] Fonseka, T., Taiwo, A. and Bharati, S. (2021) Use of arts-based research to uncover racism. *Studies in Social Justice*, 15(1), pp. 43-58.
Tolia-Kelly, D. P. (2007) Fear in Paradise: The affective registers of the English Lake District landscape re-visited. *The Senses and Society*, 2(3), pp. 329-351.
Pollard, I. (2004) *Postcards Home*. London: Autograph.

[18] ethnography is a way of learning about people's lives by spending time with them, listening to their stories, and observing how they experience and make sense of the world around them.

space but a cultural and symbolic site where ideas of Englishness, belonging, and heritage are continuously asserted and policed. Racism in this context operates not only through interpersonal hostility, but also through deeply embedded histories and ways of imagining rural spaces that render certain bodies out of place.[19]

This co-produced methodology recognised our collaborators as *partners* in the knowledge creation process. Co-production here was not simply about "involving communities," but about disrupting hierarchies of expertise and returning authority to those whose experiences are too often marginalised in research about race and place. Community research partners helped shape the content, and form of the research. This helped to redistribute power within the project and offered a framework for producing knowledge that was authentic and collectively held.

This re-storying was also deeply emotional. Many participants expressed that creative work allowed them to process feelings of anger, isolation, grief, and hope, emotions that are often left unspoken in discussions about rural racism. Artistic and creative practices provided a means to hold the layered tensions of lived experience, and to make space for multiple truths. For some, it was the first time they had communicated publicly about these experiences. For others, it was a way of connecting personal memory to collective struggle.

In a time of growing polarisation and resurgent nationalism[20], the symbolic terrain of the countryside matters deeply. It is both a material and imaginative battleground for questions of history, culture, identity, belonging, and justice. As this report will demonstrate in the following pages, when research is creative, co-produced, and rooted in lived experience, it can revive marginalised histories, amplify overlooked countryside voices, shift narratives, and open new possibilities for rural futures.

Unmasking the Mythscape

This report responds to a series of myths about the English countryside that our study found to be widely expressed. These myths influence public assumptions about who belongs, whose histories are recognised, what kinds of relationships are considered legitimate, and how rural life is imagined. They are not simply misunderstandings, but cultural narratives that sustain exclusion and invisibility.

Through creative practices (all of which can be found on our webpage) and interview testimony, each chapter in this report takes one of these myths and carefully unpacks it. We explore how racism is expressed and reinforced through historical structures, dominant cultural habits, symbolic representations in the landscape and everyday norms that shape rural life. These dominant narratives are challenged using grounded

[19] Puwar, N. (2004) *Space Invaders: race, gender and bodies out of place*. Oxford: Berg.
[20] Valluvan, S. (2021) The clamour of nationalism: race and nation in twenty-first-century Britain. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

realities drawn from lived experience and artistic collaboration. Our aim is not only to explore the harms these myths cause but also to open-up new ways of experiencing and engaging with rural spaces that are honest and equitable. This report demonstrates how creative practices disrupt eight prevalent myths which shape dominant perceptions of the English countryside.

For example, we frequently came across the repeated claim that "talking about racism is divisive. Just enjoy the countryside." This myth surfaced consistently in our analysis of online responses to anti-racism initiatives such as the National Trust's efforts to address colonial legacies, or Muslim Hikers' visibility in outdoor spaces. As explored in Unpacking the Backlash: Full Report. The comment threads and social media posts we studied often framed anti-racist interventions as distractions or provocations: "Keep politics out of nature", "Why make everything about race?", or "We just want to enjoy the countryside." These expressions may appear benign, even reasonable, but their effect is to silence marginalised experiences and uphold the uphold the notion that rural space is neutral and post-racial.[21]

What this example illustrates, and what this report explores, is how such myths operate as mechanisms of denial. They present acknowledging racism as the problem, not racism itself. They cast minoritised groups as disruptors, rather than respondents to exclusion. This framing depends on a romanticised vision of the countryside, one that obscures its colonial entanglements and structural inequalities, while ignoring the lived experiences of those marginalised in dominant representations of rural life.

Each of the eight myths examined in this report follows a similar structure: taking the lead from our collaborators, a dominant narrative that appears familiar or commonsensical is unpacked and challenged through grounded evidence, including: creative expression, interviews, historical research, commentary and analysis. These chapters do not aim to discredit individuals, but to investigate hidden assumptions that shape how rural life is imagined and experienced. In place of myth, we offer real-life experiences. These are not only more accurate; they are more just.

The example above also shows why an arts-based, co-produced approach is both helpful and revealing. The resistance to anti-racist work is not only intellectual. It is emotional and symbolic. It is about deep-rooted attachments and anxieties about transformation. This report does not seek to bypass these reactions but to confront and understand them, making space for more inclusive, truthful, reparative and creative ways of relating to the countryside and each other. In bringing to light these myths, we are not being confrontational or divisive but instead we aim to show the relevance of racial justice to these complex rural spaces.

[21] Braverman, S. (2024) Calling the countryside racist is ridiculous left-wing militancy. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/02/12/suella-braverman-countryside-racist-holiday-camping/

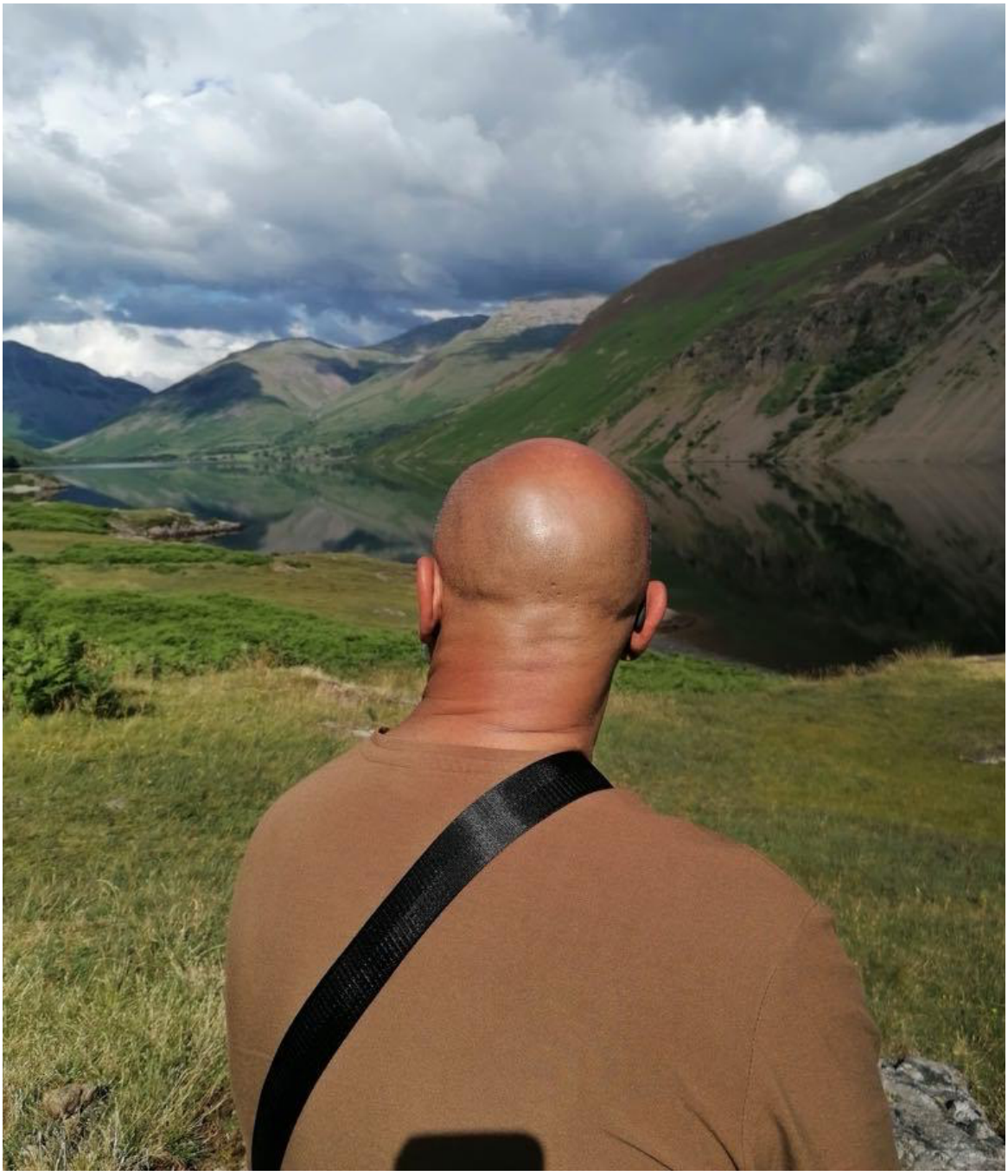
Myth One: Minoritised Communities Have No Affinity or Respect for the Countryside

The myth that minoritised communities have no affinity or respect for the countryside, continues to shape how rural life is represented and understood. It reinforces the idea that the countryside is naturally White and that racialised people are out of place within it. However, the testimonies shared below, reveal something very different. They speak of deep relationships with nature, memory, community and landscape; they are grounded, lived, and often profoundly personal.

> *"I am from, the really, deep rural… I feel the reason why I love being on the mountain so much is I just have that absolute sense of synergy, with place and being. I am utterly myself and utterly connected to that space."*
> *– Emily, Black British mixed heritage woman*

Photograph of Emily, a Black British mixed heritage woman standing in a mountainous landscape of rural Britain.

“And where I live, I am like five minutes literally down a path through a field that's either got sheep or cows in it, and I'm at the river. I have two dogs, so I often walk and I end up sat down by the river for 20 minutes listening to the water flow, looking at the trees, hearing the birds, you know, all sorts of that beautiful kind of stuff, which is really nurturing.” – Rowan, Black mixed heritage man



Photograph of Rowan, A Black mixed heritage man, sitting and enjoying the lakes and hills of rural Cumbria where he lives.

“I sit in the sunshine amongst the blooming purple irises, next to the clematis and blueberry bushes. I feel so lucky in so many ways. So lucky

to be safe and secure in this garden where I sit and write with the sound of water a constant presence. The garden is lush as it moves through May and there's promise of a summer full of more times here. The wrens who were nesting at the far end of the garden have fledged and I watch out for sightings of the young or their parents." – Seni, English and Sri Lankan woman

Photograph of Seni's lush Peak District garden in May with the irises in bloom.

"I was born in Pakistan, and I grew up in Mirpur in Kashmir. It's a mountainous area and all my childhood memories are of that place. I came to England in my early teens and got used to city life but when I went back to visit relatives, I always enjoyed the countryside more than the city life there. In my late teens I used to go on camping trips with my school friends…I always feel content and at ease in the countryside. I like the sounds and smells of livestock and other animals. It's in my DNA." – Ahmed, British Pakistani man

Photograph of Yaseen, a British Pakistani man, sitting by the lake in the grounds of Newstead Abbey.

Growing up in the Forest of Dean, it's such a beautiful place to live. You know, I went to Manchester University, and I loved Manchester, and it was brilliant, but I always knew that this [Forest of Dean] is the sort of place I'd want to bring my daughter up. You know, she's at the primary school I was at, and the same teachers are there. And it's like "the world where time stood still". It's that kind of feel to the place. And yeah, I love it here, and I love a lot of the people here. There's this kind of hold that it has over you being here. There is something really magical about this place." – Kaira, Black British mixed heritage woman

"I fundraised £300 for charity and went on a guided climb of Mount Snowdon in Wales. It was a very hard climb as I had lost much of my youthful fitness and the weather was wet and cold. Even though it was an inhospitable experience, I enjoyed the challenge and wondered if I could come out again. I joined this group and was introduced to the Peak District and the Lake district. I love all of it. I want my children to love the mountains as it reminds me of home and when they go back to Pakistan they will see familiar scenes." – Azar, British Pakistani man

"I was so very lucky to grow up in the Lake District, a place of almost sentient, verdant, bountiful nature. This, in my moments of deepest distress, was my balm, restoration and place of unquestioning acceptance." – Zena, South Asian and English mixed heritage woman

The statements above, drawn from interviews and photographs shared with the project show a deep affinity and respect for the countryside. What emerges are a multifaceted set of emotional and cultural ties to rural space shaped by memory, migration, ancestry, spiritual practice, and everyday life. These reflections span childhood and adulthood, pleasure and hardship, solitude and family. They speak not only of appreciation for rural beauty, but of healing, safety, rootedness and joy. These are not rare or novel feelings. They are part of a long-standing and often ignored set of relationships that our many collaborators hold with the English countryside.

Photograph of four British Pakistani men in the Lake District.

Despite this, our study's extensive analysis found that the view is commonly expressed that minoritised individuals do not readily belong, or respect rural space ignore these. These testimonies challenge the idea that rural identity is synonymous with Whiteness and remind us that rural belonging is not always inherited, it is imagined, created, made, lived, and felt in a variety of different ways. Our participants and partners made visible the ways they already inhabit and shape rural space. In poems and biographical pieces of writing, they do not ask permission to belong. They assert their belonging. Our research confirms that minoritised people are not only 'visiting' the countryside. They are already here: remembering, walking, healing, raising families, and finding beauty. They always have been. This is not merely rhetoric. The historic Black British

presence has already been documented by historians such as David Olusoga.[22] Throughout this and our other reports we demonstrate this continuing presence in the testimonies and creative outputs of people like Emily (introduced above) and Elma and Jake (below) who all grew up in very different parts of rural Britain.

Why challenging this myth matters

Our evidence suggests this myth is not only false, but also harmful. It allows the continued framing of the countryside as a single dominant way of life: narrow in its traditions, history, heritage, cultures and identity. A space where minoritised communities are absent by nature rather than by design. It sustains exclusion by presenting presence as anomaly.

Embedded mythologies affect how rural life is funded, researched, governed, and represented. If minoritised populations are assumed to be uninterested in the countryside, then inequities in access, representation, and safety go unchallenged. Refuting this myth means:

- Listening carefully to expressions of joy, memory and connection to rural place.
- Recognising rural belonging as plural and lived, and not only inherited or owned.
- Valuing the stories, care, and cultural life minoritised communities bring to the countryside.

Only when we understand that rural spaces have always held multiple truths, in the form of relationships, cultures, histories, struggles and memories can we begin to undo the exclusions that continue to shape them.

[22] Olusoga, D. (2016) Black and British: a forgotten history.

Myth Two: Racism in the countryside is a Figment of People's Imagination

Our research found that it is a widely held belief amongst rural residents that "there isn't any racism here." When minoritised people describe difficult situations in countryside spaces, they are commonly asked whether they are certain it was about race, common responses include 'they didn't mean it like that' or, 'it's just how people are here.' Such responses reflect a lack of awareness about how racism operates.

Across the Rural Racism Project, participants described a striking pattern: racism was not only present, but also routinely denied, disbelieved, or downplayed.

For many, the hardest part was not the moment itself, but the lingering doubt it created: the internal questioning that follows when something feels wrong but cannot quite be named, when you sense that you're unwelcome but cannot 'prove' it. For example, in a walking conversation our community research partner said:

> *"People look at you when you're on the mountain and they say things like, 'Are you lost?' 'Do you know where you're going?' To more hostile stuff… When I was parked up in the van, people were slowing down and making me wind my window down, and saying, 'Where do you think you're going?" – Emily, Black British mixed heritage woman*

This is a clear expression of what many of our partners and participants described as racialised surveillance: being observed not out of curiosity, but out of suspicion. These acts of scrutiny are not dramatic. They do not rely on overt abuse but operate through tone and implication. What might appear to others as 'friendly concern' is experienced as a quiet form of territorialism, a challenge to people's right to be in shared public spaces.

These moments are difficult to talk about not because they are unclear, but especially when mentioned in isolation, they are deniable. They offer no neat evidence, no slur or racial epithet to quote but they leave an emotional residue of discomfort and doubt that builds over time. As this community research partner revealed in an interview:

> *"You've gone to those pubs in small rural towns, and it goes silent, and everyone turns around and looks at you. Then you're not getting served as quickly as everyone else, or the drinks are getting slammed down in front of you... I can't really point it out, because it's happened a lot of times in different places, where you get that feeling. Again, because no one's pointing at you and using a slur it's like, you can't even necessarily put your finger on it. You're not really wanted in that space, or you don't feel comfortable." – Natasha, Black British woman*

This testimony captures the cumulative nature of rural racism: it is not always a single act, but a series of recurring acts or threats, both subtle and undisguised. Natsha, above, describes a shift in the atmosphere; a kind of social withdrawal that makes her feel exposed. These unspoken refusals of hospitality, slow service, impersonal gestures and disapproving looks communicate exclusion just as clearly as more overt racism yet are rarely acknowledged as such and in any case are hard to prove definitively.

The effect is not just emotional but cognitive. Our evidence suggests that minoritised people expend mental energy assessing the motives of others, decoding ambiguous interactions and regulating their own responses to avoid being perceived as "overreacting."

One of the most striking accounts came from another community research partner, a South Asian woman, who in a biographical blog, reflected on an experience during an academic visit to the Lake District:

> *"In the summer of 2024, I had the privilege to attend and present at the Wordsworth Summer Conference at Rydal Hall in the Lake District. A truly wonderful experience. A truly English landscape. The lakes, the fells, and the scenic walks they offered together. On one of these walks, with my White, male friend, as we walked past an old White couple and their dog, I heard a voice go 'yeah, you're welcome, lady.' I looked at my friend all amazed and slightly worried inside — had I offended them? But he and I were both walking past them. I absolutely, most certainly, did not brush past them or their dog. What was the stare and the remark for then? Yet again, I do not know." – Anandhi, Indian woman*

This moment ambiguous and seemingly minor, is anything but trivial. It captures the confusion, doubt, conflict and internal questioning that many of our participants and partners described: 'Did I misread that? Am I overthinking it?' But it also reflects something deeper, the unease of being made suddenly and visibly different.

It is especially poignant because of where and when it takes place: in the Lake District, one of England's most iconic landscapes, and during a prestigious literary event. The speaker is not an outsider peeking in; she is there as a contributor and scholar. And yet, even in that role, walking alongside a White friend, she is singled out, and suddenly sees herself as 'other'. The comment, subtly loaded with aggression, reminds her of her perceived foreignness, her place as 'not quite belonging'. It is the kind of moment that White peers might not notice, but that racialised participants never forget. A similar moment is recalled by another community research partner, a Black British mixed heritage woman, in her biographical writing for the rural racism project:

> *"At the age of five or six, I was too young to realise that I looked different to everyone else. I was just another kid knocking around the village. But one of my earliest memories of being 'other' was of standing at a checkout in a local shop with my mum; the cashier repeatedly asked if I was 'really' her daughter." – Elma, Black British mixed heritage woman from 'Growing up mixed heritage in the Fens: exploring identity, culture, and belonging'*

Rural racism often begins early, long before the child can name it. This moment, recalled decades later, is a quiet but jarring introduction to what it means to be seen as "out of place", not in behaviour or accent, but in appearance alone. This kind of incident, small in form but large in impact, teaches minoritised children that their belonging will always be provisional and subject to doubt.

Other participants shared similar experiences of non-verbal exclusion as in this extract from an interview:

> *"When I knocked on her door to ask about renting one of the allotments, she looked me up and down with complete disdain." – Jamila, Black British woman*

No words were needed as the power of the encounter rested entirely in the gesture. These kinds of moments tend to be overlooked because they do not produce measurable harm but, our participants told us, their emotional consequences are real and lasting especially when such incidents accumulate.

Taken together, these testimonies dismantle the idea that rural racism must be dramatic or obvious to be real. They show how racism often reveals itself through the gaps: hesitation, suspicion and silence. They also show how denial of these subtle actions compounds the injury. Being watched is one thing. Being watched and then told you imagined it is another.

Why challenging this myth matters

Denial, surveillance, and silent disdain are registers of racism that operate just below the surface, evading easy proof. In the absence of explicit slurs or overt hostility, those who mete out this treatment are able to maintain a veneer of innocence, deflect responsibility and frame the problem as one of individual perception rather than collective exclusion.

But these moments are not imagined. But, as we were repeatedly told, these moments are both real and common. They shape how minoritised people move through rural space: cautiously, guardedly, watchfully and with acute awareness of how they are being seen. Refuting the myth that racism does not exist in rural places requires more than merely calling out obvious prejudice. It means:

- Naming the forms that racism takes beyond overt abuse: silences, stares and remarks that signal ‘you don’t belong here.’
- Validating lived experience, even when the harm is hard to document and the impact is easy to dismiss.
- Listening with care to those who have learned to navigate ambiguity, who carry the accumulated knowledge of being doubted or quietly shut out.

Only by acknowledging the full range of racist behaviours, from openly racist slurs to coded incivilities, can we begin to recognise and address the personal and structural behaviours which perpetrate exclusion and sustain an atmosphere of denial. When racism is allowed to hide in plain sight, it does not disappear. It just gets harder to name and easier to ignore.

Myth Three: There are no Genuine Barriers to Accessing the Countryside

The idea that anyone can enjoy the countryside if they really want to, ignores the structural, interpersonal and material factors which affect access. It frames rural exclusion as a matter of personal choice or cultural disinterest rather than inequality. But the following reflections from participants reveal the complexity and cost of rural access. Transport, affordability, clothing, equipment, and local knowledge all shape whether people can meaningfully participate in rural life. The following quotations were either from an interview with the research team (Lydia) or in the case of the other respondents, during a walking trip organised by our community research partner Yaseen, which was the basis of his creative contribution.

> *"I've only had a car for about a year. Before that, trying to travel around Cumbria was a nightmare: buses, trains cancellations, replacement buses, no direct routes. Even now, I don't have proper walking gear. No waterproofs, no boots. I wear gym gear and trainers. If I looked at what it would cost to get all the kit, I just can't afford it." – Lydia, Black British mixed heritage woman*

> "*When I started walking, I had no idea what to buy — waterproof coat, boots, anything. Friends were slipping around in trainers. I got advice from people in the group and bought second-hand stuff, like this jacket that was too small for someone else. In Birmingham, outdoor gear is so expensive. If that's what people think they need to participate, then they just won't." – Illahi, British Pakistani man*

> *"I've never cycled in the Peak District — only walked. I'm lucky I drive a taxi and can take people. Without a car, forget it. Trains are expensive, especially with family. My first boots were second-hand, £8. The new ones were over £100. I got budget ones instead. Walking's not free. It needs boots, waterproofs, rucksacks, even maps." – Haafiz, British Pakistani Man*

> *"Not knowing how to read a map has held me back. There are no courses near me, and I didn't know many people into countryside walking. I found an older group going to the Malvern Hills and asked to join. It's hard to start if you're not confident or don't have people to walk with. Especially if you don't know the rules or how to navigate." – Ahmed, British Pakistani man*

One participant spoke about the struggle to find culturally appropriate and appealing food while camping and visiting rural areas.

> *"When we went camping, I looked for halal or vegetarian food. There was no halal, and hardly any veggie options. A lot of my friends won't*

come again because there's nowhere to eat. Forget halal. We couldn't even get vegetarian food." – Maajid, British Pakistani man

This reflection speaks to a deeper cultural inaccessibility. The absence of halal and vegetarian options, particularly in rural hospitality settings, sends a clear message about who these spaces are imagined for. Food is not incidental to outdoor enjoyment, it is central to comfort, inclusion, and the feeling of being welcome. When food options are relatively narrow, rarely catering for dietary norms that are rooted in religious or cultural practice, the countryside becomes less about leisure and more about compromise. This discourages return visits and amplifies a sense that racialised and religious minorities remain marginal to the planning and delivery of rural tourism. For more examples see Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Full Report .

These testimonies challenge assumptions that the countryside is universally accessible. Participants identify transport, clothing, cost, navigation skills, food and practical know-how as meaningful barriers to access. Entry into rural leisure is shaped not just by will, but by resources: a waterproof coat, appropriate footwear, a car, confidence in navigating, the ability to find culturally appropriate or preferred kinds of food, or simply the knowledge of where to go and how to get there. These are not incidental challenges. They structure who feels equipped to step into rural spaces.

This is not about luxury gear or elite outdoor culture. It is about the basics. Not having the right shoes or jacket can stop someone from going altogether. Not knowing how to read a map or where public rights of way begin can make country walking feel more stressful. Not having a car, or not being able to afford train tickets, keeps the countryside materially out of reach, making visits impractical. Many participants spoke of relying on friends, borrowing equipment, or searching second-hand shops just to make one trip possible. These strategies reflect resilience and commitment, but they also highlight how exclusion is built into the logistics of outdoor access. More evidence and examples of economic and physical barriers can be found in Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Full Report.

Why challenging this myth matters

This myth allows institutions, outdoor industries, and rural policymakers to ignore the realities and impacts of material and financial inequality. It frames the underrepresentation of minoritised communities in rural spaces as a matter of preference or culture, rather than an issue of access. By overlooking the relevance of cost, transport, confidence and knowledge barriers, it shifts responsibility onto individuals and away from the systems that limit choice. Refuting this myth means:

- Naming the financial, educational and logistical barriers that shape who gets to enjoy the countryside.
- Designing rural access policies with equity, affordability, and transport justice in mind.

- Supporting community-led initiatives that address material needs, like gear libraries, travel subsidies, navigation training, and shared local knowledge.

Until we acknowledge that access is unevenly distributed, we will continue to reproduce a countryside shaped by privilege one where ‘freedom to roam’ is real for some, and unreachable for others.

Myth Four: Forming Black and Muslim Walking Groups is Unnecessary and Divisive

Affinity walking groups like Black Girls Hike, Muslim Hikers, and Peaks of Colour have emerged in response to real and ongoing exclusions from mainstream outdoor culture. These groups are often discussed in suspicious terms as separatist or divisive. But for many participants, such groups create spaces of joy, cultural expression, safety, and community not to reject others, but to affirm, promote and protect pleasurable experiences in environments that have not always felt welcoming.

One of our community research partners, an older Muslim man and experienced Hike Leader, visited a rambler's group in Nottinghamshire for the first time and offered this reflection on a walking interview with a member of the Rural Racism Project team:

> *"They were cordial, but all reminded me I was the first person of colour they'd met at their group... I didn't start the conversation, but they felt it necessary. 'You're the first Asian person we've ever had at our ramblers' group.' I asked, 'Why is that then?' They had no idea. They weren't alarmed, just surprised... When I asked, 'What do you do to promote rambling to ethnic minorities?' not even the leader had a clue. It was like we don't exist. People are 'free to come,' but there's no effort to reach out. It felt very club-orientated — like a golf club, where outsiders stay outsiders." – Yaseen, British Pakistani man*

Photograph of Yaseen, a British Pakistani man standing by a wind turbine in rural Nottinghamshire.

Another participant, an experienced Black woman Hike Leader explained the disconnect between local diversity and rural visibility in an interview with the Rural racism Project team:

> *"I live in a very diverse community — Bradford has large Asian and Black populations. But on my walks, even seven miles through woods, I rarely see anyone of colour. The walking groups I first joined were White, with very few Asian or Black people." – Safa, Black African woman*

This same participant described the atmosphere of walking with Black Girls Hike:

> *"The vibe with Black Girls Hike is completely different: we laugh, we joke, we share, we stop for photos, we whatever. It's completely free. In other groups, it's not the same. Some women have experienced racism while walking…and it puts them off. They share these stories with us. That's why there's hesitation in joining other groups, and I don't want to diminish that." – Safa, Black African woman*

Photograph of a Black Girls Hike walking group.

Another participant in a Yaseen's Muslim walking group shared the following reflection:

> *"It's as much a cultural get together for us. We walk, pray, and cook curry It's not often we get to go out like this together, so it's worth protecting this time." – Nasiri, British Muslim man*

Photograph of walking trip in the Lake District organised by our community research partner, Yaseen (in the foreground), with a group of British Pakistani men.

These reflections remind us that country walking is not just a physical activity but an intimate one. It is shaped by your companions, how you are seen, and the extent to which you feel at ease. Affinity groups do not form to exclude others; they form in the absence of proactive or meaningful inclusion by existing walking groups.

That a group of Black or Muslim walkers is seen as ‘remarkable’, while White walking groups are accepted as the norm, speaks to deep cultural assumptions. The problem is not collectivity but racialised collectivity, framed as unsettling, problematic, or odd. Minoritised groups challenge that framing by creating joyful, self-determined spaces of presence, pride and belonging.

Why challenging this myth matters

This myth focuses on the discomfort experienced by people who are unfamiliar with minoritised or faith-based groups while ignoring the comfort, confidence, and community such groups offer their members. It also fails to recognise the labour of

those who create and sustain safe, inclusive outdoor spaces where none existed before. For example Black Girls Hike or Peaks of Colour. Refuting this myth means:

- Recognising the value of affinity groups as acts of care and cultural affirmation.
- Challenging assumptions that racialised presence must be ‘inclusive’ on someone else’s terms.
- Supporting the autonomy of Black and Muslim walkers to define their own relationships with rural space.

Until all walking groups are seen as equally valid, and equally necessary, the countryside will remain shaped by invisible norms that resist change.

Myth Five: Minoritised People Always Play the Victim

The myth that minoritised people always 'play the victim' is both pervasive and powerful. It circulates in ways that are subtle and explicit from media commentary and public backlash[23] to personal encounters in schools, workplaces, and community spaces. This rhetoric delegitimises lived experience by interpreting emotion as exaggeration, structural critique into personal grievance, and storytelling into attention-seeking. In the countryside, where racialised people are relatively few in number and frequently constructed as outsiders, this myth becomes an even more effective silencing tool. It casts racial discomfort as oversensitivity.

But what happens when we truly listen to the voices of minoritised individuals in the countryside, when we sit with their poems, creative writing, testimonies, and reflections without demanding that they express pain in digestible ways? The following section refuses the logic of the victim myth by foregrounding creative resistance, emotional truth, cultural self-determination and historical reimagining. These stories and artworks do not plead for sympathy. They assert presence, creativity, complexity and agency.

Creative Assertion: Rootedness, Not Fragility

One of the most effective refutations of the victim myth comes through works that assert identity with clarity and dignity, without centring suffering. One of our participants, Louisa Adjoa Parker's poem 'Land, Real and Imagined' from her book *How to wear a skin*, exemplifies this approach. The poem's speaker reflects on a dual sense of belonging rooted in the English landscape yet shaped by a lineage that stretches beyond it. The countryside is not a space of alienation, but of deep personal and ancestral resonance.

> *Yes, I am from here, really,*
> *but also from there. My feet*
> *connect me to this piece of earth*
> *which rolls away in green waves,*
> *this piece of earth inhabited*
> *by people who do not look like me.*
> *This is how I wear my skin:*
> *it tells the story of another place;*
> *an imagined country*
> *with dusty roads, hot nights,*
> *which I have yet to see.*
> *We all lean into the dark*

[23] Yip, A., Keighley, R., Kuppan, V., Fowler, C., Kelalech, K., Chakraborti, N., Nisic, M. and Clarke, A. (2025) Is There Anywhere Left That is not Considered Racist? Demystifying the Online Backlash Against Rural Racism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, pp. 1-21.

towards our ancestors, who lean
towards us, with bent spines,
trying to tell us where we are from,
where we are going.[24]

Adjoa Parker's voice does not seek validation. Instead, she offers a layered articulation of identity, shaped by migratory memories inscribed in the landscape. Her imagery evokes the physicality of belonging and the spiritual labour of tracing lineage through both soil and silence. This is not the voice of someone seeking victim status, it is a voice grounded in complexity and dignity.

Curative landscapes and ancestral echoes: Marlo de Lara's creative dialogue

Adjoa Parker's poem was chosen by one of our community research partners: a Filipino heritage artist and academic Marlo de Lara (they/siya), to orientate their audiovisual installation for the Rural Racism Project. In a 10-minute piece combining field recordings, ambient textures, musical compositions alongside narration, de Lara weaves their own experiences of dislocation, gendered and racialised surveillance, and migratory memory with the sonic and visual layers of the English countryside.

> *"Rather than focusing on the feelings of being othered, this short film is to offer how nature is a global elixir, revealing curative properties beyond the social and even further into feelings of ancestral belonging. The images and sounds are to be seen as a mood board for the short piece, a piece that I hope evokes feelings of in-between, tension, and redefining belonging for humans making multiple home(s)." – Marlo de Lara Filipino, they/siya*

Like Adjoa Parker, De Lara refuses to be considered a victim. Instead of recounting trauma, they offer sensorial and ancestral maps of belonging. Their score is a form of reorientation: placing themselves not at the margins of the countryside, but within its sonic and emotional centre. It is a gesture of creative sovereignty: I am here, I walk, I compose, I remember. This is not a plea but a practice of self-location. De Lara's film and other audio-visual contributions for the Rural Racism Project can be accessed here.

Intimacy and Self-Fashioning: Childhood in the Fens

The myth that minoritised people 'play the victim' also obscures how racialised individuals create meaning, joy and identity despite being excluded. Our community research partner, Elma, wrote a biographical piece which reflected on her experience of growing up as a mixed heritage person in the Fens. She remembers being stared at, asked if she was 'really' her mother's child and even spat at. These moments of hurt, however, do not take centre stage in her piece of writing. Instead, she remembers her childhood as one of warmth, connection, and creative exploration:

[24] Adjoa Parker (2019) How to wear a skin. Beaworthy: Indigo Dream Publishing

> *"But I somehow did not allow such ignorance to erase my spirit as a child. I suspect it had something to do with having a largely serene village life and extended family around me. I could cycle to my nan and granddad's place in 15 minutes. They always welcomed me warmly and offered me as many biscuits as I wanted, and the opportunity to pick fresh cucumber and peas in the greenhouse. I still have a sweet tooth and am a keen vegetable grower." – Elma, mixed heritage woman*

Her recollection does not deny harm but places it within a broader story of growth, creativity, and care. She stitched her own books from wool and darning needles, wrote about Black characters she had barely seen on screen, and distributed a family magazine photocopied by her stepfather. This was not 'playing the victim'; it was authorship which reflects cultural labour, emotional honesty and a means of resistance through acts of imagination. Visit the Rural Racism Project page for Elma's Glasgow's blog article.

Embodied Wounding and Embodied Strength

Emily Zobel Marshall's poem *Rock Cakes* explores an adolescent moment of rejection and humiliation in a rural village. A boy is due to visit a girl who has carefully prepared for his visit, but he stands her up. The event unfolds as both a public shame and a private heartbreak. As these extracts from her poem reveal:

> *You left me standing there*
> *I had baked you rock cakes*
> *cooling now on*
> *the Welsh dresser"*
>
> *"I'm all cherry-red lipstick*
> *mum's perfume*
> *afro is coconut-oil-shine"*
>
> *"you're dumped*
> *in front of everyone…*
> *I know it must be delaying*
> *the thickening of a*
> *new skin*

As the poem unfolds, we learn that the boy never arrives. The speaker waits, traversing muddy tracks back and forth, her carefully curated appearance and excitement slowly giving way to dread and humiliation. Zobel Marshall's poem captures more than adolescent heartbreak; it crystallises the social codes that govern belonging in rural settings. The speaker's preparations including the "Glastonbury tassel skirt", a cherished "Bob Marley tape", polished "Doc Martens", and a hint of "coconut oil" are acts of cultural expression and self-fashioning, yet they are not enough to shield her from exclusion. The rejection, when it comes, is both personal and racialised. The boy's sneering dismissal "as if I'd visit her in the sticks "is rooted

in intersectional marginality: rural remoteness and racialised femininity.

The rock cake itself carries layered meaning. At first, it is an offering of warmth and welcome. Later, it becomes a silent witness to shame. Finally, it becomes the thing “gulped back”, a “lump” in the throat that settles into silence, then grows into emotional resilience. The speaker’s voice never pleads for sympathy. Instead, the poem tracks the emergence of a “new skin,” forged in quiet necessity rather than outward defiance. This is not a poem of victimhood; it is a poem of reckoning, of surviving the slow violence of being made to feel out of place.

By embedding this intimate memory in poetic form, Zobel Marshall does more than recall an event, she exposes the racialised fault lines of belonging in the British countryside. Her creative language is not decoration but intervention: it breaks silence, names harm, restores dignity, and insists on the emotional reality of exclusion. In doing so, Rock Cakes becomes a quiet but powerful act of resistance.

If Rock Cakes maps a wound, ‘Anansi’s Tongue’ reclaims voice with exuberance. This second poem by Emily Zobel Marshall draws on the legacy of African and Caribbean oral traditions. It asserts narrative power not as defence, but through rhythm, confidence, invention, and joy.

Oh, come closer, see my
freed tongue dance &
spool itself across this page
scattering syllables from
corner to corner so
that you cannot
avoid this
silken story

Oh, lean closer, let my tongue
glide
into your ears, you knew it not but
you have only ever
been listening
for the sound
of this
story
spinning.

Zobel Marshall’s speaker is not asking for permission or understanding. She commands attention. The tongue freed, silken, gliding becomes both instrument, subject, and channel, animated with ancestral memory and creative vitality. The poem invites intimacy, but on its own terms. The reader must “lean closer,” must listen actively, as the poem spins its own cadence.

This is not just a celebration of language; it is a reclamation of narrative space. Drawing on the figure of Anansi, the West African spider-trickster, Zobel Marshall situates the poem within diasporic traditions of wit and storytelling. The form itself mimics oral performance: its breath, suspense, pacing, and repetition. The poem culminates in a whispered command: “Shhhh / hold the thread / for now / it begins…” evoking not closure, but a beginning. In doing so, it resists static identity and instead asserts continuity, motion, growth and renewal.

Where Rock Cakes reveals the emotional cost of exclusion, Anansi’s Tongue is joyful, uncontained, and radically voiced. Together, these poems do not simply describe rural racialised experience they perform its complexity and refusal. Emily Zobel Marshall’s full poems can be accessed via the Rural Racism Project webpage.

Rowan, one of our community research partners and a Black mixed-heritage man, who moved to rural Cumbria speaks of his presence in overwhelmingly White outdoor spaces as intentional. His walking is not leisure alone; it is a symbolic and political. In a walking interview with one of the research team he discloses:

> *“Even when I used to walk the fells before I moved up here 10 years prior… I wouldn't see hardly any, if any, Black and Brown faces… I wonder how many Black people have walked this fell. I'm one in a very small minority, if not the first… I always feel like I'm a pioneer.” – Rowan, Black mixed-heritage man*

Later he adds that he knows his presence may challenge White expectations, but that he sees this disruption as a contribution, not a burden. There is no trace of complaint here. Instead, there is a quiet and deliberate practice of showing up, walking, and being seen, not to demand recognition, but to offer an alternative image of who belongs in rural spaces.

Rowan, a Black British mixed heritage man walking by the coastline in Cumbria.

Why challenging this myth matters

To accuse minoritised individuals of ‘playing the victim’ denies the full emotional, cultural, political and historical texture of their lives. It flattens complex identities into caricatures and suggests that silence should be the price of inclusion. But, across the Rural Racism Project, participants refused this framing: through poetry, through art, through walking, through remembering and speaking. They did not deny hurt, but neither did they present it as their only story. Instead, they narrated, questioned and persisted. Refuting this myth means:

- Recognising that naming injustice is not victimhood, it is voice.
- Valuing creative expression as a form of analysis, truth-telling, resistance and joy.
- Understanding that minoritised people do not carry a single story of harm, but have complex webs of memory, culture, resilience, and imagination.

Myth Six: Rural History is White History

It is often assumed that the English countryside exists in isolation from the historical forces of empire, migration, and racial violence. Its curated landscapes: gardens, stone cottages, winding hedgerows, patchwork fields and dry-stone walls are widely believed to be untouched by colonial expansion or imperial profits. This myth is sustained not only through an established and longstanding pastoral tradition of writing and art but also through institutional silences. Historic England's plaques may gesture to architectural detail or agricultural innovation, but they rarely tell us who created the wealth used to buy land or the wide variety of people whose labour shaped and sustained these landscapes. Such omissions create versions of rural history that centre the lives of landowners and ignores historical connections with the labour of enslaved and colonised people across the empire. Historical phenomenon that are customarily viewed as strictly national affairs, such as the expansion of country estates or the enclosure (privatisation) of common land, are intimately connected to the influx of imperial wealth in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[25]

As recent historical studies have shown, country estates were often redesigned or expanded with the proceeds of Caribbean slavery plantations, East India Company profits or through trading activities that exploited colonised labour. Hundreds of portraits of Black servants still hang in stately homes, from Charlecote Park to Sudbury Hall. Rural villages benefited from philanthropic legacies funded by colonial extraction, such as the Gurney family of Norfolk, Quaker bankers whose wealth came in part from financing colonial commerce, or the Fox family of Falmouth (referenced by one of our community research partners below), who invested in abolition but profited from colonial shipping routes. Agricultural innovations were often tested on lands seized from others or funded by returns from the colonies. Still, this violent entanglement with empire is frequently overlooked. To challenge this myth is not simply to 'add in' historical racialised minority presences, but to recognise how both historical amnesia and a knowledge deficit have shaped our collective understanding of rural life. This requires both archival recovery and creative re-imagination, or simply beginning by acknowledging that what is absent can be just as telling as what is present. One just absence is rendered below. A faint archival trace, suggestive and incomplete, invites us to read rural history, not only through what is not recorded but what is resisted.

Maria From Penryn

Maria from Penryn, is a poem written by one of our community research partners, Kate Bernstock, a Black Jewish woman. It draws from the historical record to imagine a day in the life of Maria, a "Blackwoman…baptised at St Gluvias in 1769", later recorded in the 1851 census as a British subject "born Africa," and married "three times" within the same Cornish parish. Through creative writing, Bernstock brings Maria's presence into

[25] Fowler, C. (2024) Our island stories: country walks through colonial Britain. London: Allen Lane.

the landscape of eighteenth-century Cornwall, evoking her embodied experience of faith, memory, love, longing and resilience.

Photograph of St Gluvias church in Penryn, Cornwall.

Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's practice of critical fabulation[26], this is not a speculative fiction for its own sake. Rather, it is an act of radical remembrance: a refusal of the archive's silences and omissions, and a reclamation of voice where it has long been denied. The poem asks: what might Maria have seen, felt or prayed for on a summer day in 1778, shortly before her first marriage?

In the poem, Maria leans against the "heat of the stones of St Gluvias", her breath catching as she reflects on a world remade by baptism and migration. She "tastes the isthmus"[27] between herself and others, recalls the kindness of local Quakers, and finds solace in "John's laughter echoing" through the tunnel beneath her feet. Her thoughts shift to the manicured gardens of the "Big House", its polished beauty undercut by the suffering that enabled it. She forages beyond the hedgerows, through shadows and brambles, seeking the fruit that blooms in hidden places.

This creative and collaborative act does more than insert Maria into rural history. It reclaims it. The poem reminds us that the English countryside was not and never has been an exclusively White space. Her imagined presence testifies to the unspoken

[26] Critical Fabulation is a method of writing that blends historical research with imaginative storytelling to give voice to those hidden or silenced by the archive. The approach was developed by Saidiya Hartman. (See Hartman, S. (2008) Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe*, 12(2) pp. 1-14.)

[27] Literally isthmus is a narrow piece of land that connecting two large landmasses, often bordered by water. In this metaphorical context the isthmus is the thin, fragile connection between realms: "herself and others"

griefs, whispered prayers, quiet resistances and moments of tenderness of those whose lives were never meant to endure in the record, but who persist, nonetheless. Maria's story, part historical fact, part invention is etched into the landscape and remembered in verse. Kate Benstock's full critical inventive poetry can be accessed via the Rural Racism Project webpage.

Reclaiming entangled histories: colonialism, breadfruit, and forced migration

Photograph of Caribbean breadfruit

This reflective piece by another of our community research partners, Niellah Arboine, a Black British woman of Caribbean heritage offers a deeply resonant and layered challenge to Myth Six: 'Rural history is White history.' While on the surface it is a personal food memoir, it is, in fact, a quietly radical act of archival reanimation, tracing botanical, familial and imperial histories that link Jamaican rural life and British landscapes.

The piece challenges the idea that rural Britain is monocultural by showing how Britain's countryside is entangled with colonial history. The journey of breadfruit, introduced to the Caribbean from Tahiti, by William Bligh as a cheap food source for enslaved Africans illustrates this perfectly. The presence of Bligh's tombstone in Lambeth, and the juxtaposition of this with Caribbean growers in the local museum, is

a sharp reminder that the colonial archive is not remote: it is close by, and even mundane. These colonial legacies are etched into the soil and stone of British landscapes. This directly contradicts the myth that rural British histories are ethnically and culturally "pure," untouched by the forces of slavery and empire.

The narrative reclaims Black agricultural knowledge and diasporic cultural practices as central to both Jamaican and British rural life. Breadfruit becomes more than a food; it is a site of transmission for inherited knowledge and embodied history:

> *"I thought about our traditional growing knowledge, passed down for generations and brought with us to Britain."*

Niellah connects her grandmother's act of roasting breadfruit in Jamaica to contemporary diasporic life in London, where growing and cooking are also acts of remembering and honouring Black cultural traditions. This kind of diasporic Black rurality is rarely acknowledged in public histories or rural heritage initiatives. Yet it positions Black traditions of cultivation at the very heart of what rural knowledge can be.

The power of the piece lies in how it weaves personal memory with historical recovery. The peaceful act of eating breadfruit with her grandmother is not separate from the plantation past, it is intimate resistance, made possible by survival:

> *"Even after emancipation, what began as a necessity for survival, soon became a cultural norm up until this very day, when my grandma and I shared slices for breakfast."*

Niellah animates a history of violence not through dramatic re-enactment, but through sensory memory and the tender relationship that exists between grandmother and granddaughter. In this rendering, roasted breadfruit becomes a site where empire, resistance, and love coexist. The historical wound is present but not overly exhibited; instead, it is understood through everyday acts of nourishing the body, like eating together. This radically expands the archive of rural history, privileging oral transmission, and embodied memory over written documents or museum plaques.

By ending the piece in Lambeth, a borough in London with rural traces and colonial histories (like the Garden Museum and St Mary's-at-Lambeth church), Niellah collapses the boundary between rural Jamaica and metropolitan Britain. She reminds us that English landscapes bear the imprint of empire:

> *"These histories meeting practically on my doorstep."*

The myth of the White countryside relies on a forgetting of how Britain's rural wealth and aesthetics were made possible through colonial extraction and plantation slavery. This piece gently refuses that historical amnesia by tracing and uncovering global

exploitation and infusing this history with a personal story that connects family and community together. Niellah closes by naming breadfruit, and other "provisions," as symbols of survival and resistance. Even as the food was introduced as a tool of plantation economies, it became a means of sustenance and eventually, pride:

> *"Today, it still quietly serves as a symbol of the legacy of resilience and resistance to colonialism."*

In this framing, rural Black life is not just a colonial residue, it is an active, ongoing cultural phenomenon. Niellah Arboine's full article can be accessed via the Rural Racism Project webpage.

Unearthing erased histories: libraries, archives, and the Senhouse Papers

Peter Kalu, a Black British man, contributes a poetic and satirical reflection entitled: *The loneliness of the colonial countryside walker: channelling my inner Greto Garbo*. It speaks to the loneliness of confronting colonial amnesia in rural England. Kalu's impulse to slip away from a Cumbrian gift shop and go into Whitehaven Archives mirrors the work of historians who question official versions of the rural past. Seeking out some historical documents called the Senhouse Papers, he foregrounds historical narratives that local tour-guides and plaques omit. William Senhouse, a celebrated "local boy made good," kept hundreds of people in bondage and fathered children on his Barbadian plantation, worked by enslaved people. The archives, Kalu shows us, carry the unvarnished accounts of rebellions, beatings, and daily cruelty that the town's promotional literature leaves out. Kalu's archival turn is an act of resistance: it focuses on the violence of primary sources which might otherwise have remained a secret.

The tour guide's "monologic parade of pleasant niceties" in his piece about the "African Trade" functions as a modern-day plantation memorial, sanitising trade in human lives into a quaint curiosity. Kalu's urge to interrupt, even to "fart", reveals how deeply uncomfortable the truth remains for his listeners. Yet his self-censure ("I swallowed my tongue…No tourist wants to hear that") speaks to the power of myth: once a place is branded "green and pleasant," it becomes unthinkable to speak of its violence. His departure from the gift shop is metaphorical: to truly see rural history, one must leave behind the souvenir-laden facade and follow the traces of those who were dispossessed.

In Kalu's dream sequence, the boundary between past and present dissolves. The relentless chase by monks and crows dramatise how colonial violence haunts the very soil of Whitehaven. This surreal encounter is not mere fantasy; it is an embodied warning that landscapes carry ghosts of exploitation. By invoking Magical Realism[28], Kalu collapses time, showing that the legacy of plantation economies still courses

[28] Magical Realism is a literary and artistic style in which fantastical or supernatural elements are presented as a natural part of everyday life, blurring the boundary between reality and imagination.

through British cemeteries, churches, and fields. The dream becomes a critical fabulation in its own right, animating the silence of official records through visceral imagery.

From the linen-clad hotel to the “Church of British” monks chanting imperial catechisms, Kalu maps how national symbols including “monasteries”, “Full English breakfasts”, “two world wars”, “one world cup” and “Brexit” are stitched together to reinforce a mythologised sense of Englishness. His sudden cry of “Also, slave trade!” ruptures this ritual, forcing a chorus of denial. In that moment, the rural idyll splits open to reveal its hidden foundations: slavery, rape, enforced silence, racial exclusion and the erasure of uncomfortable histories. Kalu’s narrative insists that every hedgerow and church bell in rural Britain is complicit in reproducing the myth of a benign, secluded countryside.

By framing the story as both personal memoir and archival detective work, Kalu shows how individual testimony can challenge communal amnesia. His exhaustion, his slip into Marquez-tinged dreams, and his flight into “blood-soaked hills” remind us that the journey to truth is neither neat nor comforting. It is messy, surreal, and sometimes terrifying. Yet that very messiness is the means by which we reclaim a more honest rural history, one that acknowledges both the beauty of place and the horrors buried beneath its surface. Peter Kalu’s full article can be accessed via his Substack.

Why challenging this myth matters

Unmasking the myth that rural history is White history is vital not simply to correct the record, but to understand how historical erasure underwrites contemporary inequality. When the countryside is imagined as inherently White, it becomes easier to marginalise or question the legitimacy of minoritised people who live, work, or walk there. It also allows rural institutions—from schools and churches to museums and local councils—to reproduce exclusions while claiming neutrality. This myth is not benign; it shapes belonging, policymaking, and access to space. Refuting this myth:

- Exposes how rural histories present the countryside as intrinsically White and silence the lives of minoritised people.
- Challenges the selective forgetting that underpins rural heritage narratives and their links to empire, slavery, and migration.
- Opens up space for alternative histories, creative interventions, and emotional truths that reimagine the countryside as a place of presence, not absence.

Exposing this myth forces us to confront how rural landscapes are racialised: not through overt hostility alone, but through narratives that naturalise Whiteness, erase Black and Brown histories, and overlook ongoing colonial entanglements. It also

invites us to reckon with the violence of historical amnesia: with the stories omitted from village histories, the plantation wealth behind philanthropic legacies, and the subtle ways in which empire still lingers in hedgerows and house names.

Equally, this work matters because it opens space for refusal and reimagination. Through methods such as critical invention, we refuse the authority of the colonial archive to set the terms of rural history. We make room for the voices of Maria, Neila's reflections, Peter Kalu's Whitehaven narrative, and others who do not fit the dominant pastoral frame. We affirm that memory is not only a matter of evidence, but of care, speculation, and justice. In doing so, we begin to craft a countryside where all histories, and all people can belong.

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 and disruptive presences in the rural landscape; transient outsiders whose movements are framed through suspicion and threat. It positions White rural residents as settled, and orderly while rendering Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers' ways of life as lawless, polluting, and incompatible with modern rurality. The realities are otherwise: Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller groups have deep historical, cultural and economic roots in rural Britain. Their very marginalisation and the legal, spatial, and symbolic exclusion they face reveal more about the racialised boundaries of national belonging than about the communities themselves.

A publicly available photograph from *Traveller Times* showing the historic presence of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers in the New Forest, Hampshire.

In *This Land*[29], Jake Bowers, a Romani mixed-race activist, blacksmith, cultural worker, journalist and producer narrates with a colleague over a sequence of archival images: horse-drawn wagons at the Epsom Derby, encampments in rural Surrey, and roadside commons in the South Downs. These images are not nostalgic backdrops; they are visual affirmations of historical presence.

In an interview with the Rural Racism Project, Jake speaks of growing up between a council estate in Hastings and a Romani site in West Sussex. His experiences were embedded in specific geographies and included Nutbourne, Butser Hill and Horndean. His memories are infused with detailed ecological knowledge: “we knew all the fields and all the woods… fences were there to be crossed.” His recollections refuse the erasure of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers’ histories from the land and instead locate his community as long-standing rural inhabitants and contributors.

These contributions are not only practical, through agricultural work, coppicing, animal care and mobile trades, but also cultural. Jake is a blacksmith by training, a tradition passed down within Romani communities and now nearly extinct. He forges not only tools but sculpture, such as the life-sized Gypsy Cob placed at the University of Sussex, soon to be installed near Brighton. “There are very few Gypsy smiths left… but there are a lot of us called Smith,” he quips. The joke belies a serious point: names survive where histories are excised.

[29] This Land was a film originally commissioned and funded by Lankelly Chase for the human rights advocacy group Aye Right. After conversations with researchers from the Rural Racism team it was offered by Jake Bowers, the producer (Gypsy Media Company Ltd) to support the work of the Rural Racism Project.

Photograph of Jake Bowers our community research partner in his metalsmith workshop in East Sussex.

Importantly, the film also looks eastward to India, reminding viewers that the Romani people trace their origins to groups that migrated from northern India over a thousand years ago. As Jake reflects in the interview, Romani crafts, trades and even musical traditions bear the marks of this deep historical lineage. In a walking conversation with the rural racism project team he cites the word 'Gorga' (non-Gypsy), derived from the Sanskrit-rooted 'Gadja,' meaning civilian; a linguistic trace of a diasporic people whose skills in entertainment, animal husbandry, and metalsmithing once supported military economies across South Asia. “We’ve never started any wars”, he notes, “but we serviced them”. This connection reminds us that Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers’ culture is not only part of British rural heritage but also part of a global diasporic history shaped by resilience and adaptation.

In *This Land*, the camera lingers on roadside barriers, concrete bollards and spike-topped walls not as incidental scenery, but as intentional architecture designed to repel. Jake calls this “hostile architecture”, and he urges us to read it historically. These obstacles, he says, are not just physical but symbolic: material expressions of a

countryside curated for exclusion. “They’re not just anti-Gypsy measures; they’re a testament to our persistence.”

These features of the built environment embody the efforts to erase Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people’s presence from rural space, while ironically confirming its historical significance. Resistance is built into the land, not only in how Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people have moved through it, but in how they have been policed, repelled, and reasserted their presence. Jake’s sculptural practice takes this tension and reworks it as intervention. The life-sized Gypsy Cob sculpture is a physical reclamation, not only of visibility but of imagination and memory.

The exclusion of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities is not only spatial but institutional. As Jake lays out with precision: planning law, local council decisions, and national legislation all work to displace and contain Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers’ lives. Despite formal protections under the Equality Act 2010, the planning system routinely blocks applications for Traveller sites. Caravans are deemed 'inappropriate' development in rural zones, even though they have existed in those landscapes for centuries.

The Criminal Justice Act 1994 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 reinforce this logic of exclusion criminalising nomadism and trespass, and allowing police to seize homes. While actual enforcement has been uneven (Jake notes that some forces are reluctant to use these powers), the chilling effect remains. Moreover, such laws reinforce a message: Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities do not belong. This is systemic racism in legislative form, where law encodes a vision of the countryside as White, static, and owned.

Jake’s work, both in his blacksmithing and his media activism, insists that Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are not relics. They are contemporary and evolving. In one sense, he is keeping traditions alive through metalsmithing, horsemanship and oral storytelling, but in another, he is retooling those traditions for public memory and political contest. Jake Bowers four-and-a-half-minute film, This Land can be accessed via the Rural Racism Project webpage.

photograph of metalwork sculptured stallion by Jake Bowers.

His critique of media stereotypes (e.g., the burning caravan scene from *60 Days with the Gypsies,* a 2021 Channel 4 documentary where he was one of the producers) reveals how Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers' representation is often shaped by voyeurism and sensationalism. Jake contests this not just by critique, but by producing alternative forms: poetry, sculpture, articles and films that speak with nuance. His analysis of parallels between Romany and other racialised cultures (Black, South Asian and Indigenous) situates Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers' heritage within broader global narratives of displacement, cultural resistance, ancestral continuity and the refusal to be erased.

Why challenging this myth matters

This myth sustains some of the most entrenched and institutionally sanctioned racism in rural England. Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities face exclusion not only from planning systems and media narratives, but from the very idea of who the countryside is for. Jake Bowers account and *This Land* offer a necessary

counterpoint: grounded in historical memory, informed by everyday struggle, and committed to justice and visibility. Refuting this myth:

- Confronts the demonisation Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities by placing their histories and political struggles at the centre of rural narratives.
- Disrupts racist tropes that portray Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people as outsiders, threats, or inherently criminal.
- It acknowledges the continuity of exclusion these communities face and affirms their rightful place in rural life and memory.

To expose this myth is to contest the racialised spatial order of rural England, one that privileges Whiteness, property, and sedentarism. It is also to reassert Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people as rural subjects: craftspeople, ecologists, storytellers, and citizens. Jake's insights remind us that romantic notions of the countryside as heritage sites often conceal its violent histories of enclosure, and its ongoing exclusion of those who do not fit. In this context, to recognise Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers' presence is not a gesture of inclusion, it is a political demand for land justice, historical accountability, and cultural recognition.

Myth Eight: White Rural Residents are all Racist

In politically polarised times, conversations about racism are often reduced to blame or denial. 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. Thus, this section challenges that framing. It explores what it means to act in solidarity, to stand alongside others, and to engage with uncomfortable truths without defensiveness. The myth that *all White people are the problem* obscures the structural nature of racism and overlooks the efforts of those working quietly and consistently to confront it within their own communities. What follows are not acts of individual virtue, but creative practices and relationships that reflect shared values and commitments; the kinds of actions that slowly re-shape the terms on which belonging and justice are understood in the countryside.

Portland

Portland, you brought out the best in us

A groundswell of decency and at its nucleus a throbbing heart of kindness

The arteries of which spread out into our community

People united by a need to support those....

Who, by no fault of their own found themselves confined to little more than a barge, a prison, a pen

Hearts, homes, stories, food, laughter, tears shared

Life long friendships forged

People with little monetary wealth giving to those with nothing at all

And those with nothing at all, gave back, they really gave their all

They told us their stories, forever etched into our psyche

The treacherous journeys to escape persecution, death

The man who came home to find his village, his village massacred

The man whose sisters were confined to their home by the Taliban, their education, jobs, voices, future denied them

The man tortured by electric shocks

The man missing an eye, we did not ask why

The men with faces bearing invisible yet evident scars of trauma

The men with families, homes, professions, lives they did not want to leave, but had no choice

The men whose collective gentle resilience knew no limits

The men who gave so much to our community, volunteering at charity shops, gardens, museums, allotments, picking up the discarded litter of those who mocked them, didn't understand or worse, hated them...

Because Portland you were ugly too

Those who used words like invasion, vermin, rape, murder

Those who invented stories to discredit them

Those who told women who showed kindness they deserved to be raped, that they were prostitutes and would be hounded off our island

Those who said they would be ground down until they committed suicide, a graphic suggestion of what form it should take

Those who used other words like woke, loonies, lefties, do-gooders, cult members, government plants

Those with heads full of conspiracy theories

But it was more serious than that...

People of colour photographed on buses

Accusations of abductions

Asylum seekers accused of photographing children

A dog kicked to death

A rumour that school girls would be issued with rape alarms

The man with a doctorate who said "who are these people they speak of, they are not me"

GB News courting those who accused....

Encouraging them to spread their fake news

A photo of Leonard Farruko doctored to include Gary Glitter standing beside him

The implication that a young man driven to suicide by his situation

Was a paedophile

Imagine that, if you will....

Such hatred from those who live in our midst

But the kindness drowned the echo chamber of hate

The men are going, soon all will be gone

We will remember them with affection

The men with pure hearts and minds

Who left to continue their journey knowing on this island....

There was love.

Laney White's poem opens this final myth with a deep emotional intelligence that acknowledges both the ugliness and the beauty of rural solidarity. It refuses to simplify or sentimentalise the situation, instead holding space for contradiction: the barge (the Bibby Stockholm) as a site of confinement and friendship; the community (Portland) as a source of hate and hope. The poem names the trauma endured by asylum seekers, but also the trauma that racism enacts upon a community's capacity to care and to see clearly. In its detailing of kindness, of stories shared, of pure-hearted giving, Laney reminds us that solidarity can arise from ordinary people with little material wealth but a deep ethical instinct. That this poem is written by a White woman resisting the tide of hate in her community speaks directly against the myth that all White people are inherently complicit or uninterested change, or beyond the possibility of reflection or repair.

To understand the importance of White figures of hope, we must also consider the work of Professor Corinne Fowler. As a White woman academic and co-investigator on the Rural Racism Project, Fowler has been central to challenging narrow and amnesiac accounts of British rural history. In her book *Our Island Stories: Country Walks Through Colonial Britain*, she not only traces colonial histories of the countryside but acknowledges her own ancestral links to slavery, an act of ethical accountability that is both rare and necessary. Fowler's presence, and her creative collaboration with Black writer Pete Kalu, exemplifies what genuine co-conspiratorship can look like: not guilt-ridden silence, but active solidarity.

In Kalu's archival and biographical piece that was introduced earlier in Myth six, Kalu recounts a powerful and unsettling dream. Amongst various images and people, he references "the slave trade", "women of Barbados raped by William Senhouse[30]" and a "lynch mob" who chase him over "blood-soaked fields." However, he evades capture, and Corinne enters the dreamworld where they "wipe away one another's tears…and link hands". It is a startling gesture, an act not of rescue but of shared resistance in which they "hold hands and stride across those hills" together. In this dream-space, the gesture becomes a symbolic refusal to let colonial histories sever the possibility of alliance. It is a form of solidarity that resists erasure, recognises the cost of action, and centres the power of standing together across difference. What Kalu envisions, and what their working relationship enacts, is a model of cross-racial collaboration rooted in trust and political commitment.

Other forms of every day, place-based solidarity emerged through interviews and field trips by the rural racism project team. Mark Williams, the director of the Hollowford Centre in Castleton, Derbyshire, offers one of the clearest examples. As part of the Lindley Educational Trust, the centre uses outdoor education to support young people from across the country, embedding this within a long-standing commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. But inclusion here is not a passive concept. Under Mark's leadership, the centre has worked intensively with minoritised communities from Ashton-under-Lyne and Sheffield in particular, building relationships over decades and creating pathways for minoritised young people to lead. He speaks candidly about his own learning curve from a White, Welsh upbringing with little exposure to racial diversity. This changed when he met one of our community research partners, Yaseen, through an outdoor and leisure activity course at university. Mark's engagement with physical activity in rural spaces and friendship with Yaseen was a real driver for motivating him to work in youth and community projects that included young people of colour. He subsequently developed mountaineering programmes and leadership schemes rooted in local communities and led by minoritised individuals.

These or not one-off initiatives. The young people who passed through Hollowford often become youth workers, mentors and project leaders. For example, Razia and Ayeesha, both Muslim women raised in working-class British Bangladeshi households, now design and lead programmes that centre minoritised girls' and women's empowerment in the outdoors. Others, like Abdul, a Pakistani British man, began as a participant, returned to volunteer, became a qualified instructor, and now works for Greater Manchester Police, while still finding time to return and support the Hollowford Centre's mission. This is slow, generational change grounded in trust and belonging. When Mark reflects on what solidarity looks like in practice, he speaks not of 'outreach' but of long-term partnership and everyday accommodation: providing prayer spaces, offering halal food, reshaping activities to include an encourage, not

[30] An eighteen century Cumbrian born mariner and merchant who profited from transatlantic slave trade. See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645567

just to comply. He has also confronted racism directly intervening when staff or participants are subject to hostility in rural settings. His commitment is not just to access but to transforming these environments to make them more welcoming for minoritised groups.

The contributions of Janine in Barrow-in-Furness and Suzanne in Whitehaven also underscore the powerful, ongoing efforts of White women in rural areas who are challenging racism at the coalface of community work. Janine Adams leads Furness Multicultural Community Forum with a fierce commitment to dialogue, refusing to minimise economic struggles while challenging locals to rethink who is to blame. Her method is one of open education: sharing facts, offering care, and building spaces like the Culture Café where people meet over food and slowly unlearn suspicion.

Photograph of a Furness Multicultural Community Forum community café showing different groups of people talking together.

Suzanne Wilson, a community-based researcher in West Cumbria, offers a searingly honest reflection on her own working-class White identity and discomfort with Whiteness. Her account includes both structural critique and human insight from the

strategic invisibilising of refugee families to the complex figure of Jan, an elderly White woman whose apparent racism is borne not only of prejudice but of dispossession and fear. Suzanne's willingness to sit with discomfort, to challenge without shaming, shows that racism must be understood relationally. Rather than dismissing Jan, she frames the challenge as one of bridge-building, not bunker-building.

These examples force a fundamental reconsideration: instead of assuming White people are the problem, we might ask who is *doing the work* of anti-racism and how they are positioned. The right-wing caricature of 'wokeness' as an elite imposition disconnected from ordinary lives—is upended by these accounts. Here, so-called 'woke' agendas are found not in ivory towers but in allotments, churches, youth centres, and Facebook pages where the cost of caring can be high, especially for women.

Why challenging this myth matters

To leave this myth unchallenged would be to abandon the possibility of cross-racial coalition. It would also let the far right define the terms of engagement, cynically presenting themselves as the voice of 'ordinary people' while vilifying those who speak up against injustice. White anti-racist solidarity is not only possible, it is necessary, especially in rural contexts where minoritised individuals are often few in number and highly visible. Refuting this myth:

- Resists reductive narratives that frame all White people as uniformly complicit, uncaring or irredeemable.
- Recognises the labour, risk and solidarity that many White individuals enact in the struggle against racism.
- Affirms that anti-racism is not only possible in rural areas but already happening quietly, collectively, and with conviction.

This myth also matters because of its intersectional resonance. The demonisation of 'woke' culture so often wielded as a slur is an attack not just on anti-racism but on feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, disability justice, and all forms of collective liberation. When the Culture Café in Barrow offers food from Eritrea, Poland and Syria, when asylum seekers volunteer to replant vandalised community planters, when Corinne names her ancestors' involvement in slavery, when Suzanne challenges her own discomfort with Whiteness these are not just anti-racist acts. They are acts that refuse the hierarchy of human value in any form.

The kindness and hope in this myth are not saccharine. They are hard-won, politically conscious, and profoundly intersectional. In Laney's words: *"there was love."* That love, enacted in rural England by allies like Laney, Corinne, Janine and Suzanne and by White men like Mark and the communities he works alongside, is the love that resists racism, resists forgetting, and insists on shared futures over buried pasts.

Conclusion / Reflective Summary

Across this report, we have confronted one persistent paradox: while the English countryside evokes images of timeless beauty and cultural heritage, it is also a landscape marked by exclusion and struggles over who belongs. From the opening introduction's historical unpacking of grand estates built on colonial wealth to the creative, arts-based provocations of our community research partners, each element of this work has revealed how rural life is both material and symbolic, individual and collective, enduring and contested.

The introduction to this report anchored this inquiry in a recognition of the rural as a site of powerful cultural and symbolic expression. Countryside settings have been associated with beauty and civility on the one hand and landlessness and agricultural labour struggles on the other. Landscapes and rural lives were also changed by colonial wealth. The countryside has also had a longstanding, if forgotten, Black presence. Some rural places, like Whitehaven and Falmouth, were once more multicultural in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they are today.

Though, in more recent years, migration has tended to be seen as a uniquely urban phenomenon, minoritised individuals have long lived and worked in the countryside as farmers, gardeners, fruit pickers, carers, taxi-drivers and restaurateurs. In recent decades they have also made a significant collective contribution to rural economies. Redistribution policies focused on rehousing refugees and newly arrived asylum seekers across rural Britain have also affected local demographics. Meanwhile, Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller peoples were driven by legislation into marginal sites; policing practices reinforced exclusion; heritage sites sanitised or omitted the intimate connections between imperial violence and rural landownership. Our introduction challenged these omissions by suggesting an arts-based approach, a method that embraces creative expression, co-production, and the symbolic power of storytelling as both research practice and political intervention.

By bringing together 115 conversations with people from minoritised communities and 20 community research partners, we explored their artistic responses: poems, films, podcasts, photographs and essays that challenged the rural idyll by inserting voices and experiences long excluded. We argued that arts-based research is not a soft add-on, but a mode of resistance. It reclaims rural spaces through emotional resonance and symbolic reimagining. It allows individuals to articulate exclusion, tie emotions to landscapes, and stage counter-narratives that push back against inherited meanings. This approach aimed to redistribute authority from academics to those whose lived experiences provide evidence of rural racism. The resulting creative outputs did not merely document oppression; they refused it, rebuilding place as plural, contested, and alive with possibility.

Each of the eight myths we examined unveils a distinct facet of rural exclusion and offers creative, narrative, and practical counters to it. The first myth: 'People of colour have no affinity or respect for the countryside' was dismantled through testimonies that revealed deep emotional, sensory, and ancestral ties to rural land. From the Fens to the Forest of Dean, participants narrated intimacy with nature: childhood play, ritual walks, healing by rivers, stillness on mountain tops and the grounding comfort of the land itself. These voices affirmed that rural belonging is not inherited through lineage alone, but made through memory, ancestry, spiritual practice, and daily life. Rejecting the myth meant insisting that presence is not a concession, but an assertion of identity and care.

The second myth: 'Racism is a figment of people's imagination' exposed how denial and disbelief are themselves forms of violence. Participants detailed non-verbal hostility silences, stares, uneven service that signify territorial policing. The repeated questioning of lived experience erodes confidence and mental wellbeing, erecting a barrier of doubt around minoritised testimonies. By naming these acts: racialised surveillance, silent disdain, subtle policing and coded politeness we showed that racism in rural spaces often hides in plain sight. To refute this myth requires validating ambiguous experiences and listening with humility.

The third myth: 'There are no genuine barriers to accessing the countryside' challenged the notion of universal availability. Through reflections on cost, transport, clothing, navigation skills, and culturally appropriate food, participants identified material obstacles that shape opportunity. The countryside, far from open to all, demands resources: waterproof coats, cars, maps, halal options, that are unevenly distributed. Exposing this myth calls for equity in policy and practice: gear libraries, travel subsidies, local knowledge-sharing. Material justice becomes inseparable from spatial justice.

The fourth myth: 'Black and Muslim walking groups are unnecessary and divisive' revealed why affinity groups emerge as sites of affirmation and safety. Testimonies from Black Girls Hike and Muslim walking groups reframed these collectives not as separatist enclaves, but as spaces of joy, cultural expression, and community care that resist the norming of the White outdoor. Denouncing these groups as 'divisive' obscures the everyday hostility that racialised individuals face in mainstream settings. Validating affinity groups affirms their essential role in building cross-cultural solidarity from positions of strength rather than token inclusion.

The fifth myth: 'People of colour always play the victim' emerged as the most pervasive silencing device. We countered it by highlighting creative assertions. This included poems by Louisa Adjoa Parker and Marlo de Lara, narratives of self-fabrication in the Fens, Emily Zobel Marshall's lyrical interweaving of vulnerability and self-armour. These works do not demand pity; they demand listening. They articulate pain alongside resilience, imagination alongside resistance and joy alongside insight. To

refuse the victim myth is to honour complex emotional and creative labour as valid forms of truth-telling.

The sixth myth: ‘Rural history is White history’ uncovered the active erasure of colonial entanglements that underpin rural heritage. Kate Bernstock’s narrative reinvention through Maria of Penryn and Niellah Arboine’s breadfruit memoir reanimated lives and traditions excised from official archives. Peter Kalu’s archival detective work in Whitehaven uncovered the violent colonial entanglements of its local elite. These interventions insist that colonial violence is not a distant abstraction, but sown into the soil of parks, churchyards, plantations, manor house estates and museum collections. Acknowledging this history is the first step to reckoning with its present legacies.

The seventh myth: ‘Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities are a scourge on our countryside’ was confronted through *This Land* and Jake Bowers’s interview. Here, centuries of nomadism, craftsmanship, and rural activism were laid bare, from coppice work in Surrey to metalsmithing in Sussex. We saw how legislation, planning, and policing encode systemic racism, yet how creative resistance in the form of sculpture (Gypsy stallion), poetry, documentary and film reinscribes Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller people as rightful heirs of the land. To expose this myth is to demand land justice and planning equity.

Finally, the eighth myth: ‘All White people are the problem’ reminded us that while Whiteness is the key axis of power, solidarity is possible and necessary. Laney’s poem, Corinne’s act of ethical genealogy, Janine’s community café in Barrow, Suzanne’s reflective labour in West Cumbria: each stands as a testament to White allyship that is neither paternalistic nor performative, but rooted in listening, accountability, action, solidarity and care. These White figures of hope do not negate the need for systemic change but demonstrate that exclusion is never monolithic.

Taken together, these myths and their refutations offer a holistic map of rural racism’s contours and its contested futures. They show that racism operates in law and architecture, in quiet glances and coded behaviour, in silent archives and curated histories, spatial boundaries and everyday interactions. They also show that resistance through poetry, film, community gardening, metalsmithing, walking, podcasting, and gardening is equally multifaceted. Rural transformation requires both structural reform through policy, planning, policing, education and housing, as well as cultural revolution animated by shifting narratives, reimagined symbols, creative practice, emotional truth and acts of collective reparation.

At the heart of this work lies an invitation: to reimagine rural England as a site of plural belonging, a living tapestry woven from multiple histories, identities, and futures. This requires moving beyond nostalgia for a lost past toward a radical present of co-creation. It demands institutional humility: museums that collaborate with those whose stories were never told, parks that foster dialogues about land and labour, councils that co-design heritage trails with makers and activists. It calls for everyday acts of

recognition: a smile across a campsite, an offer of borrowed gear, a shared meal in a community café, directions given on a muddy path, a conversation at an allotment gate, a lift offered after a long walk.

Finally, we must remember that rural racism is tied to broader structures of exclusion that include class, gender, sexuality, disability and age, and that an intersectional lens is essential. When the ‘woke’ label is wielded to silence anti-racism, it obscures how homophobia, sexism, ableism, and economic precarity intersect to shape rural experience. Embracing an intersectional politics of care and justice means refusing to silo struggles. It means forging alliances across difference, rooted in common demands for land justice, accessible transport, inclusive heritage, and creative space.

As we close this report, let this be our collective commitment: to transform our understanding of the countryside from a static scene into a vibrant process. A process of continual re-storying, re-imagining, and re-making; where every voice, every footstep, every poem, photograph, act of care and shared memory, helps to shape a landscape that truly belongs, not just to those who pass through and dwell, but to those who dare to dream that the countryside can hold all of our histories, and all of our futures.

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