UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking the Backlash: Full Report 3

Content Warning

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

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- Anti-Racist Cumbria
- Black Body Heart Mind Consultancy
- Black Girls Hike
- British Trust for Ornithology
- Black Voices Cornwall
- Devon Development Education
- JSCN – Jewish Small Communities Network
- Natural England
- Portland Global Friendship Group
- Tiny Travels Cultural Education CIC

Their commitment to equity, inclusion and racial justice in rural spaces is an inspiration, and their 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 the Backlash

This executive summary presents the core findings from the "Unpacking the Backlash" stream of The Rural Racism Project. This strand investigates the nature, triggers, and impacts of hostile responses to discussions about rural racism, offering insights into how and why backlash occurs when rural racism is raised in public or online forums.

Context and Rationale

Despite growing recognition of racism in rural England, public and online discussions frequently provoke intense backlash. This resistance impedes progress toward inclusion and understanding, making it vital to systematically analyse how backlash manifests and what it reveals about rural identities, power dynamics, and the boundaries of belonging.

Methodology

The "Unpacking the Backlash" research employed a qualitative approach, including **case studies and discourse analysis.** Approximately 193,000 words were collected from below the line comments of news articles and social media posts, and public debates about rural racism, heritage, and countryside access. Analysis of eight case studies reveal how backlash against discussions of race and the countryside promotes racism and exclusion.

Key Findings

Case Study One: The National Trust: In September 2020, the National Trust released an interim report discussing how 93 of its 300 properties are connected with colonialism and historic slavery. Following this, the National Trust was criticised for:

- Being too ‘political’ and trying to force an unwelcome version of British history onto its members and visitors.
- Any changes of interpretations relating to historic objects were regarded with suspicion, and as acts of ‘sanitising’ or ‘erasing’ history.
- An ‘us versus them’ strategy was employed as people foregrounded their national identity and expressed pride in their country whilst denying the necessity to discuss colonialism and historic slavery and their relevance.
- ‘Whataboutery’ was employed to shift the attention to other examples of historical wrongdoings and discriminatory acts, suggesting that they are more relevant or significant for today’s society.

Case Study Two: Changes to Built Environment: The toppling of Edward Colston's statue marked the beginning of a series of actions taken against statues and other memorials related to enslavers and colonialists. Following this, there were discussions about the location and interpretation of statues and their representation in both historical and contemporary contexts:

- Statues and monuments are inherently viewed as valuable because they are important symbols of *our* history, where we can learn from the mistakes of ancestors to build a better society for the next generation.
- Commentors employed a 'the past is the past' approach whereby attention is shifted from historic to modern slavery.
- Sceptics question current calls to address colonial history and representational meanings of statues and places. White advocates are depicted as virtue signallers who should not take an interest in the matters of non-White groups.

Case Study Three: The Renaming of Pubs: In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the corporate sector was under scrutiny for its historical involvement with slavery. Many businesses, including pubs, were found to have links to individuals who benefited from the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. The complexity of the stories behind pub names racialised the discourse around renaming:

- The issue of retaining or losing historical pub names shows that a name is not *just* a name but entails layers of historical and cultural meaning. To the sceptics, proposed pub renaming represented an attempt to erase history and damage British culture.
- Political correctness was seen as a destructive, radicalising force, in which people are viewed as oversensitive and too easily offended.
- Online sceptics suggest that reasoning (e.g., the origins and history of pub names) is being threatened by emotional considerations (i.e. appeals to address concerns about racist names), and entails 'virtue signalling'.

Case Study Four: Gardening: Several individuals have spoken publicly about horticulture's diversity problem, criticising it for lacking sensitivity to issues of race. This includes how words such as 'heritage' and 'native' are commonly perceived as synonymous for 'better', whilst individuals also disclose experiences of covert and overt racism in the field. These remarks sparked a backlash:

- Gardening is seen as needing to be 'rescued' from being politicised by including discussions about race or racism, as commentators imbue their arguments with exaggeration, sarcasm and parody.
- Some commentators declare that they are not racist and place the onus on people who are not White to rationalise what they perceive to be racist. This

creates two simplified categories - minoritised groups who believe racism exists versus White sceptics - whose world views are depicted as irreconcilable.

- At the root of the backlash is a strong sense of pride and belonging towards the country. ‘This occurs everywhere’ is a common argument to normalise racist actions and reasoning.

Case Study Five: Muslim Hikers: Hiking might seem accessible to all, but research shows that minoritised groups are underrepresented in the outdoors. Consequently, Muslim Hikers launched as a walking group in July 2021. Through organising regular hiking events, it hopes to demonstrate to Muslims and other underrepresented communities that physical activities in outdoor spaces are accessible to them. Following this, they experienced increasing online abuse:

- Commentators employed a ‘no barrier’ sentiment to access the countryside that is racialised. Minoritised people who feel unwelcome in the countryside are blamed for finding excuses, not trying hard enough, or lacking genuine passion for nature.
- Online sceptics argue that minoritised groups do not follow ‘The Countryside Code’. Sceptics assume the power position through representing themselves as more knowledgeable and experienced in hiking, and minoritised people as incompetent and ignorant of the etiquette in the countryside.
- The necessity of foregrounding one particular identity is questioned, suggesting demands for public attention and special treatment, and the building of ‘fake’ barriers by starting their own group rather than joining any existing walkers’ groups which – they imply – would have no difficulty welcoming them.
- The founding of Muslim Hikers triggered an invasion narrative which sees some commentators criticise the group for attempting to expand their territory and ‘control everything’. This ‘us vs them’ narrative, portrays the UK as superior to other nations whilst the actions of ‘foreigners’ are incongruent with ‘British life’.

Case Study Six: Travellers: Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, with distinct histories and cultures, are often met with inflammatory media representations and are not welcomed by local settled residents in rural spaces:

- Online commentators criticise Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers for not following laws and regulations. They argue that these communities ‘play the minority card’, using their identities/marginalised status to get special treatment, whilst disrupting the lives of ‘law abiding’ villagers.

- Online commentators discuss the itinerant cultures of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities and their relationship to the countryside, representing them as uncivilized and greedy, whilst exploiting legal loopholes and engaging in crime.
- In cases where Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller groups seek to set up 'permanent' rural sites, their identity is viewed to be relinquished and their status as minorities with protected characteristics is consequently contested.

Case Study Seven: Debate Programmes: Various stakeholders are advocating for a more inclusive countryside through focused equality and awareness-raising campaigns. These narratives were picked up by mainstream media, producing programmes which sparked furious debate on the question 'Is the countryside racist?':

- Online commentators who self-identify as rural residents express a desire to protect the status quo by resisting changes which might unsettle established ways of being, whilst suggesting that minoritised groups are outsiders who are not British, or not British enough.
- The backlash against raising the topic of rural racism stems from contesting established definitions of racism, whilst expressing bewilderment. The suggestion that there are barriers to access are rejected, while the underrepresentation of minoritised groups are attributed to personal choices and practical considerations.
- Among those who question that rural racism is an issue, there is strong resistance to any self-identification as racist. This in turn prompts reflections about what constitutes racism.

Case Study Eight: Research and Backlash: This involves an attempt to empirically record and analyse online abuse directed at the Rural Racism project. This reveals the scale of the challenge, given the strength of resistance to acknowledging and addressing rural racism:

- When newspapers feature the topic of rural racism, they often cite the work of academic researchers, sometimes referring to them as 'experts'. This word-choice triggers a clear backlash, characterised by dismissal of their expertise.
- Academics are accused of falling prey to confirmation bias, selecting examples of racism based on preconceived beliefs and producing opinion pieces rather than evidence-based work.
- These online expressions of doubt about the legitimacy of research into rural racism are often explicitly linked to the ethnicity of the researchers involved, suggesting that researchers in this area should be White because of the

purported fragility or victim mentality of academics from marginalised groups.

Conclusion

The research identified several overarching themes that illuminate the complex dynamics of rural racism and resistance to addressing it:

- **Resistance to discussing racism:** There is widespread denial that racism exists or that it is significant in rural contexts. Efforts to address rural racism often provoke anger or defensive reactions.
- **Failure to acknowledge barriers:** Online commentary frequently downplays or ignores the barriers minoritised groups face in accessing the countryside, instead framing their concerns as oversensitivity or manufactured issues.
- **Preserving the status quo:** There is strong resistance to reinterpreting rural heritage, including towards changes in how colonial history is represented in public spaces and reluctance to raise awareness of rural racism.
- **'Us Versus Them' mentality:** Rural identity is habitually equated with Whiteness, as minoritised groups are depicted as outsiders, reinforcing exclusionary narratives.
- **Misconceptions of racism:** Rural racism is dismissed as irrelevant or limited to overt acts, with more subtle or systemic forms overlooked or trivialised.

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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 which restricts 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 minoritised 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*. London: Routledge.

[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 widespread underreporting.

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. In particular, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, the mainstreaming of divisive language[6] and the emboldening of far-right movements continue 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 which 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 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 offer welcome and exclusion, and how powerful cultural forms can influence the boundaries of belonging.

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[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.

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 third work stream, Unpacking the Backlash.

Unpacking the backlash

This Online Backlash Report seeks to seek to uncover the nuances of language as a 'constitutive feature of actions, events and situations,' rather than merely a means of describing or transmitting information about them[9]. There appears to be a very particular and often visceral reaction to those who raise issues of race in the countryside that this report seeks to understand through describing the various 'triggers' for backlash, as well as similarities and differences in the counter-narrative.
It addresses this objective by presenting eight case studies featuring organisations, groups and individuals from diverse backgrounds to gain a nuanced understanding of the online backlash against rural racism. These explore various kinds of backlash (representative quotations are used to illustrate the language of backlash) but these examples are by no means exhaustive.

[9] Whitehead, K. (2017). Discursive approaches to race and racism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

The first three case studies focus on history and culture. Case Study One features the actions taken by the National Trust to address its links to colonialism and historic slavery. Case Study Two considers responses to recent changes to our built environment, including heritage sites, monuments, and public spaces. Case Study Three focuses on British pub culture and considers the historical and cultural significance of pub names.

The next two case studies are concerned with unequal access to two popular leisure activities in the UK. Case Study Four explores British gardening and challenges facing gardeners of minoritised backgrounds. Case Study Five features the experiences of a hiking group organised by minoritised groups. Case Study Six considers the experiences of Romani (Gypsies), Roma and Irish Travellers.
The final two case studies focus on direct public engagement with the topic of rural racism and analyse people's attempts to contest established definitions of racism. Case Study Seven highlights TV and radio debates on the topic. Case Study Eight discusses the backlash against researchers, where we will recount our own experiences of conducting the Rural Racism Project.

Our analysis allowed us to compile a corpus (a collection of texts for the purposes of applying specific research questions related to natural language use) with the software #LancsBox, and used corpus tools to examine frequency lists, keywords, and collocations. Frequency lists show the most commonly used words; keywords refer to the most statistically significant words in the entire dataset, as well as for each of the eight cases; collocations are words that tend to occur near each keyword. These three tools allowed us to gain an initial sense of the entire dataset. The second step of our analysis was to apply CDA to the sections of text containing the most frequent words, the keywords, and the most important collocations. This allowed us to identify dominant themes and gauge the use of linguistic and discursive strategies for justifying statements against racialised people.

A note on terminology

We recognise that racial and ethnic 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 ethnic 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.

Case Study One: The National Trust

> *"The National Trust cares for places and collections on behalf of the nation, and many have direct and indirect links to colonialism and historic slavery. Our interim report … examines these links as part of our broader commitment to ensure that they are properly represented, shared and interpreted"* (The National Trust)[5].

The National Trust, colonialism and historic slavery

In September 2020, the National Trust released an interim report discussing how 93 of its 300 properties are connected with colonialism and historic slavery.[10] The report includes a gazetteer listing the places and collections whose wealth and power is hinged on complex historical narratives.

Connections to colonialism and slavery often take multiple forms across successive generations. They could involve, for example, building wealth through the proceeds of slavery, owning businesses connected to the enslavement of people and supporting or opposing the abolition of slavery.

Such connections, however, are not easily discernible because they happened in the past and they took place away from Britain in the colonies:[11] imperial naval battles were fought in distant oceans and sugar, cotton and tobacco wealth was created by enslaved people in the Caribbean and North America.

As a charity with over five million members, the National Trust oversees the protection of the nation's coastline, historic sites, countryside and green spaces.[12] With a membership which is Whiter and older than the UK population at large, the conventional expectation has been that the organisation's role is to conserve the heritage of its buildings and historic landscapes rather than to detail repressed histories. The context for this case study is hostile social responses to the organisation's decision to reveal the sensitive colonial histories of properties in its care. Immediately after the publication of its 2020 report, it was reported that many National

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[10] The National Trust. (2020). *Interim report on the connections between colonialism and properties now in the care of the National Trust, including links with historic slavery.* https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf

[11] Fowler, C. (2021). *Green unpleasant land: Creative responses to rural England's colonial connections*. Peepal Tree Press.

[12] The National Trust. (n.d.). *The history of the National Trust*. https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/the-history-of-the-national-trust#rt-about-the-national-trust

Trust members threatened to cancel their memberships,[13] although the data showed that membership actually rose from 5.4 million (2019-2020) to 5.7 million (2020-2021) during this period.[14] Four years on, the National Trust's decision to discuss this history still receives considerable public and media attention.[15]

This section discusses online backlash against the National Trust, highlighting the most common language and strategies used to condemn the revealing of its links to colonialism and slavery.

'Don't lecture us!'

Following the release of the interim report, the National Trust was criticised for being too 'political' and trying to force an unwelcome version of British history onto its members and visitors. Tensions arose from disagreement about the positioning of the National Trust and whether or not it should take up the educator role and speak about the colonial past of its properties. For some people, the only job of the National Trust is to protect heritage sites, which they personally associate with relaxation, and the promotion of national pride.

> *"Just look after the properties and leave the politics to the politicians. Ffs, go woke, go broke. Not visiting or supporting anymore. Please do not 'educate' or lecture us. I go round houses to appreciate furniture, art and gardens. We don't need to have your view of history forced upon us."*

Among the detractors, the prevailing view was not that established knowledge should be revised in light of new research developments,[16] and they did not consider that it was the National Trust's responsibility to discuss research findings about its properties' colonial links.

> *"Our history, good or bad, is what made us who we are today. We should not judge history by today's views nor should we apologise for it."*

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[13] Young, S. (2020, August 24). 'Do not lecture us': People cancel National Trust memberships in anger after it discusses links to slavery. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/national-trust-slave-trade-colonialism-links-cancel-membership-twitter-a9685026.html

[14] The National Trust. (2023). *Annual Report 2022-23*. https://documents.nationaltrust.org.uk/story/annual-report-2023

[15] For example: Quinn, B. & Horton, H. (2023, October 2). National Trust defends right to campaign on nature amid 'pressure' from lobby group. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/oct/02/national-trust-defends-right-to-campaign-on-nature-amid-pressure-from-lobby-group

[16] Fowler, C. (2022). Country houses, slavery, and the Victorians: Reinterpreting heritage Sites. In Espinoza Garrido, F., Tronicke, M., & Wacker, J. (Eds.), *Black Neo-Victoriana* (pp. 230-249). Brill.

Not all comments were hostile by any means and many others appreciated the efforts of the National Trust to educate the public about histories that had hitherto remained undiscussed or unknown to the public.

> *"If you're going to tell a story it must be the whole story, we must stop leaving the unpleasant bits of history out. Thank you for this informative thread of tweets."*

History: Distress and preservation

In August 2020, a Daily Mail article quoted Tarnya Cooper, the National Trust's Curatorial & Collections Director, observing that some objects in the organisation's collections are 'really distressing'. This sparked anger on social media, where hateful comments were directed at people who were distressed by the artefacts that are linked to colonialism and slavery. Critics were most dissatisfied with the 'abrupt' change in attitude and they could not understand how feelings or representations of historical objects/events could change. The opinion was commonly voiced that history is static. There was widespread refusal among detractors to incorporate new research and information into heritage narratives.

> *"No one ever noticed them before and now they are distressing Can we not just get rid of the 'distressed' people?"*

> *"These artifacts were never distressing to anyone until the poor little woke soles decided that life was too hard for them to live in, unless they were centre of attention and that they had everything given to them on a plate !!!!! the people who would be offended are hardly likely to visit a national trust"*

While the National Trust made the decision to retain most of these 'distressing' artefacts in 2020, the preceding discussion about potentially removing certain objects had already caused a backlash. Any changes of interpretations relating to historic objects were regarded with suspicion, as acts of 'sanitising' or 'erasing' history. Once again, a static view of history was invoked and new interpretations of past events were considered unviable, and the view presented that established histories should be respected and retained. Everyone is expected to respect and accept history as it was.

> *"They are part of history. We can't erase it or pretend it didn't happen. We should not be intimidated into feeling guilty for things we had no control over and nor should we feel the need to apologise for the sins of our forbears. History is there to educate and learn from. Those who wish to eradicate all knowledge of it are ignorant and foolish."*

Us versus them

A closer examination of language use reveals an 'us versus them' strategy regularly at play. People who respond to the National Trust's news negatively distinguish themselves from people who hold opposite views and/or who are unhappy about the National Trust's decision not to remove distressing artefacts. There is rarely any attempt to communicate or empathise with those perceived as enemies or opponents but instead outright expressions of alienation or rejection are made.

> *"We are what we are, if those that come don't like us then they should be made to leave full stop"*

The backlash also involves people foregrounding their national identity and expressing pride in their country. Analysis of collocations (words which are more likely to occur within the neighbourhood of another word in certain contexts) of 'our' indicates that the pronoun is frequently used in conjunction with words like 'culture', 'heritage' and 'country' to convey a strong sense of belonging and ownership. A somewhat personal space is created for like-minded individuals, and intrusion into this space is condemned.

> *"Anyone not proud to be British and hating our culture and heritage can leave our country and go and live in a more tolerant country if you can find one"*

> *"Why don't these new arrivals who are so disapproving of our proud history, just leave?"*

Whataboutery

One common strategy of denying the necessity to discuss colonialism and historic slavery (and their relevance) is to shift the attention to other examples of wrongdoings and discriminatory acts, suggesting that they are more relevant/significant for today's society, or emphasising that the National Trust is not the only villain.

> *"Can we now concentrate on white slavery practiced in the past against our merchant ships in the Med and modern sex slavery practiced against Central and Southern European women and little boys."*

> *"Concentrate on something relevant like modern day slavery ffs"*

This strategy draws on the false dilemma fallacy which compares the sufferings of marginalised communities and creates the illusion that the gravity of an issue can be clearly determined and that we can only attend to one problem at a time. Contrasting

different forms of oppression overlooks the ongoing impacts of past injustices and narratives on present-day inequalities.

Case Study Two: Changes to Built Environment

> *"Decolonisation is not simply the relocation of a statue or an object; it is a long-term process that seeks to recognise the integral role of empire in British museums – from their creation to the present day. Decolonisation requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work" (Museums Association)[13].*

The past and present of statues

In June 2020, amid the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd,[17] the statue of Edward Colston was toppled in Bristol. Born into a wealthy merchant family in Bristol, Colston participated in the Atlantic slave trade when he began working with the Royal African Company in 1680 – a company that enslaved an estimated number of 84,500 people and caused 19,300 fatalities.[18] Despite Colston's role in the slave trade, the city of Bristol erected a statue engraved with the inscription, 'Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city AD 1895'. Colston was therefore honoured and remembered for his philanthropic efforts, with little mention of the source of his wealth. The toppling of Colston's statue marked the beginning of a series of actions taken against statues and other memorials related to enslavers and colonialists. By January 2021, it was reported that almost 70 memorials across the United Kingdom had been removed or altered.[19] In reaction, new laws were announced in January 2021,[20] which required local consultation and full planning permission when removing historic monuments:

> *"We cannot – and should not – now try to edit or censor our past. That's why I am changing the law to protect historic monuments and ensure we don't repeat the errors of previous generations, losing our inheritance of the past without proper care"* (Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2021).

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[17] The police killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in the United States led to worldwide antiracism protests. See Pressman, J., & Devin, E. (2023). 'Profile: The diffusion of global protests after George Floyd's murder.' *Social Movement Studies*, *23*(4), 558–565.

[18] Nasar, S. (2020). Remembering Edward Colston: histories of slavery, memory, and black globality. *Women's History Review*, *29*(7), 1218–1225.

[19] Mohdin, A. & Storer, R. (2021, January 29). Tributes to slave traders and colonialists removed across UK. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/29/tributes-to-slave-traders-and-colonialists-removed-across-uk

[20] Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. (2021, January 17). *New legal protection for England's heritage* [Press release]. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage

In June 2021, the Bridging Histories learning project was launched by the We Are Bristol History Commission and partners to invite the public to reflect on the past and future of heritage.[21] In their report published in 2022, 65% of the surveyed residents in Bristol felt positive about the Colston statue being pulled down, commenting that Colston should not be celebrated given his role in transatlantic slavery. Among those who had negative feelings towards the incident, most either said that the act was illegal, or expressed the view that people should not 'ignore or forget unpalatable aspects of history'. In 2023, contributing to the further development of the 'retain and explain' policy,[22] Historic England highlighted the importance of reinterpreting contested heritage:[23]

> *"The best way to approach statues and sites which have become contested is not to remove them but to provide thoughtful, long-lasting and powerful reinterpretation, which keeps the structure's physical context while adding new layers of meaning"* (Historic England, 2023).

As explained above, discussions about the past and present location and interpretation of statues centres on their representation in both historical and contemporary contexts. A backlash can be triggered in the process of negotiating the symbolic meanings of removal, re-siting or reinterpretation.

Removal = erasure of history?

There is a strong sentiment that statues and monuments are inherently valuable in and of themselves because they are important symbols of *our* history and 'we should all feel a shared sense of ownership and inheritance for the nation-state through them'.[24] This discourse underpins knee-jerk reactions to any proposal to alter *our* built environment: history should not be 'erased' nor 'forgotten'; it needs to be respected by every individual. It follows that some commentators are exercised by the idea of statue removal, which they equate to erasing history and express concerns about a loss of connection with the (country's) past. The logic of the idea that statue or monument removal equates to historical erasure can and should be questioned: Colston's statue is now more visited and prominent than ever before and, since it was subject to major news coverage, the statue's related history is more widely known and discussed than ever before.

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[21] https://bridginghistories.com/
[22] Department for Culture, Media and Sport. (2023, October 5). *'Retain and explain' guidance published to protect historic statues* [Press release]. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/retain-and-explain-guidance-published-to-protect-historic-statues
[23] Historic England. (2023, October 5). *Reinterpreting Contested Heritage*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested
[24] Moody, J. (2021). Off the pedestal: The fall of Edward Colston. *Public History Review, 28*, 1–5.

> *“I feel like my history is being erased... I grew up proud to be part of the snowflake generation, but that name has now been stolen by everyone crying about the relocation an awful statue that they didn't even know existed until now.”*

> *“Please DON'T remove it. I find it hard to believe anyone, of any race or colour would be 'traumatised' by it. Be proud of your history wherever you came from. You are on a journey and removing the past won't change it. It's the future that counts and how you accept the past.”*

Elaborating on why statues should be kept in their present locations no matter how problematic they might have become to contemporary society, commentators refer to the significance of history in education: it is important to be reminded of the past and learn from the mistakes of *our* ancestors so that we can build a better society for the next generation.

> *“You can't airbrush history, removing all traces of our questionable past just brushes it under the carpet, surely these things can be used as talking points to learn mistakes of the past.”*

> *“Put it back its part of our history, its wrong to wipe it out people need to know where we went wrong in the past so it isnt repeated. What next blow up the sphinx in egypt.”*

While few would contest the principle that we need to learn from history, the counter-argument remains that statues can be better contextualised to facilitate the learning process as, collectively, we cannot be expected to be aware of the story of every statue.

The past is past

Similar to the backlash against the National Trust, online sceptics adopt a strategy known as ‘whataboutery’, whereby attention is shifted from historic to modern slavery. Ongoing issues such as ‘poor working conditions’, ‘worker exploitation’ and ‘child labour’ are represented as more pressing concerns. Historical wrongs, on the other hand, are past events and, ‘by definition’, unchangeable (and so *our* money and time should not be wasted on remembering historic slavery). This argument is unevenly applied to Britain’s historic involvement in transatlantic slavery rather than to public commemoration of other chapters in British history, such as World War I and II.

> *“Taking down the statue won't erase the painful history of slavery. Monuments should be kept as a reminder not to let it happen again. There is still slavery going on in the world, why don't the people who are offended by the statue use their anger where it would be helpful to others.”*

> *“Monuments depicting slavery. But I bet you won’t stop buying from famous high street companies that sell clothing made in sweat shops*

that pay very little wages and have pore working conditions, so they can make bigger profits. Wake up all of you and leave things be."

Bringing modern slavery into this discussion essentially promotes the idea that we should focus our effort on tackling challenges in current times and build a better future. However, this view does not recognise that historical events are insufficiently understood, that they can have lasting effects or that history is being continuously created rather than erased. The act of the statues' removal has accordingly been envisaged as 'creating history'.

"As much as they represent the contexts of the times when they went up, they also embody the context of the present where they came down. These monuments were removed by the collective action of activists and protesters in the name of the Black Lives Matter campaign – in the name of confronting and calling out racial violence against black people and institutionalised racism around the world" (Moody, 2021).[25]

In other words, online sceptics dismiss the rationale behind changes to build environment because their thoughts and concerns are not focused on the everyday experiences of people who are impacted by the ways in which past events are (un)acknowledged, remembered or (un)addressed.

Virtue signalling

Sceptics question current calls to address the colonial (particularly transatlantic slavery) history and representational meanings of statues and places. In this discourse, White advocates are depicted as virtue signallers who should not take an interest in the matters of non-White groups. Dismissing genuine efforts to create meaningful dialogues effectively side lines conversations about the legacies of colonialism and slavery in public spaces, often wrongly assuming that these issues have not been raised in previous decades.

"If that statue has stood for 247 years and has caused such trauma, why have we not heard about it before. UTTER MADNESS."

"I am sure that this virtue signal, demanding that the statue is removed will end modern slavery, stop "hate" and makes him feel important. Only one of those things will happen in this case and it involves his white saviour complex."

[25] Moody, J. (2021). Off the pedestal: The fall of Edward Colston. *Public History Review*, *28*, 1–5.

Case Study Three: The Renaming of Pubs

> *"…while the origins of these pub names are obscure what is clear is that there is a perception that they are linked with racism today and we want to make this positive change for the better" (Greene King, 2021).*

What is in a name?

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the corporate sector was under scrutiny for its historical involvement with slavery. Many businesses from banks and insurance companies to pubs were found to have links to individuals who benefited from the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. According to the legacies of the British slave-ownership project, conducted by University College London, 47,000 people received a total of £20 million in compensation for their loss of 'human property' after slavery was abolished.[26]

Among the beneficiaries was Benjamin Greene, founder of the brewery that became Greene King, one of the UK's largest pub chains. Acknowledging Greene's involvement in transatlantic slavery and anti-abolitionism, the pub chain pledged to make substantial investment to support people from Black, Asian and minoritised backgrounds and work towards becoming an anti-racist organisation, in June 2020.[27] In January 2021, Greene King announced their decision to rename four pubs (three were called the Black Boy and one was called the Black's Head).[28] Meanwhile, other pubs across the UK have faced similar calls to change their names. For example, the pub chain Wetherspoon has a pub called 'The Black Boy' in Newtown.[29] Another Wetherspoon pub, 'The Elihu Yale' in Wrexham, was found to be named after Elihu Yale, who played a role in the slave trade.[30]

Renaming is not necessarily straightforward given the significance of a pub's name to local culture and residents, especially when there is dispute over the name's connotations. One of the most controversial names is the 'Black Boy', which has a

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[26] Smith, M. (2020, June 17). Colonial slavery shaped modern Britain, and we all live with its legacies. *The Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/17/colonial-slavery-shaped-modern-britain-still-live-legacies/

[27] Pub chain and insurance hub 'sorry' for slave links. (2020, June 18). *BBC.* https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53087790

[28] Greene King takes anti-racist stance by changing names of four pubs. (2021, January 14). *Greene King*. https://www.greeneking.co.uk/newsroom/greene-king-takes-anti-racist-stance-by-changing-names-of-four-pubs

[29] Skopeliti, C. (2021, February 19). Wetherspoons to keep 'Black Boy' venue after Greene King changes its pubs' names. *The Independent*. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/wetherspoons-black-boy-greene-king-racism-b1804586.html

[30] Wrexham's Elihu Yale pub name rethink over slave trade link. (2020, June 8). *BBC*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52969786

variety of potential meanings including reference to the role of chimney sweeps; trading places for colonial goods like sugar or tobacco; and showing allegiance to King Charles II, who was believed to be "swarthy".[31] It has also been claimed that a Linlithgow pub called the 'Black Bitch' refers to a black greyhound who brought food to her starving owner.[32] The obscurity and complexity of the stories behind pub names explains why changes in naming might lead to a backlash (e.g., residents might feel a loss of connection to history and the local community). The discourse that surrounds such renaming, however, is frequently racialised.

History and culture

Similarly to the backlash against the National Trust and changes to built environments, the issue of retaining or losing historical pub names shows that a name is not *just* a name, but entails layers of historical and cultural meaning. To the sceptics in our sample, proposed pub re-namings represented an attempt to erase history and damage British culture. Advocates for these changes were framed as enemies, not only of local punters but of British nationhood and identity.

> *"When will they start the mass burning of history books in the streets? This is completely out of control and damaging British culture and way of life. This is the most tolerant country in the world yet 'they' are still 'offended'. I'm offended by their wanton destruction and ridiculous demands. As they loathe this country so much, why haven't they left?"*

In illustrating their emotional connections with local pubs, online commentators share personal stories about their visits including the ambience, food, and the company of fellow pub-goers and local proprietors. For these locals, village pubs differ from larger urban establishment, serving a deeper purpose than merely selling alcoholic drinks and food; they are 'community pubs' where locals acquire and experience a sense of belonging and come together to socialise and discuss issues related to their neighbourhood.[33]

Citing their positive experience as evidence, some online commentators are shocked to learn about the accusations of racist pub names. They believe that the complainants do not actually visit the pubs, and they have little knowledge of the history of the pubs, including the origins of their names, and so the opinions of the community of pub-

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[31] Fullerton, E. (2023, February 7). Turner prize finalist Ingrid Pollard explores why so many British pubs have the same racist name. *Art in America*. https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/turner-prize-ingrid-pollard-explores-british-pubs-racist-name-1234654950/

[32] Brooks, L. (2022, February 2). Campaigners to fight on as Black Bitch pub becomes Willow Tree. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/feb/02/campaigners-to-fight-on-as-black-bitch-pub-becomes-willow-tree

[33] Cabras, I. (2011). Industrial and provident societies and village pubs: Exploring community cohesion in rural Britain. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 43*, 2419-2434.

goers should be prioritised. The commentators assert that even if 'outsiders' change the official name, locals would continue to use the original name of a pub.

> *"It's a decent local pub with better than your average pub food....and recently had a make over with an excellent outside dining area...."*

> *"I'm originally from a town just 3 miles from Bewdley and have spent many hours at that pub over the years. The locals love the pub and there's no way anyone would have wanted the name to be changed. This is yet another example of people just caving in to pressure from those with a very twisted agenda. Regardless of the sign outside it will always be called the Black Boy."*

Political correctness as the villain

In trying to understand why advocates of pub name revisions are unable to recognise the significance of preserving historical names, some online commentators blame political correctness. Advocates for change are presented as a minority, figuring negatively in this discourse as 'PC idiot', 'PC zealot', 'PC moron', 'woke mob', 'woke snowflake', 'woke wannabe', 'woke muppet' and 'woke dope'. The expressions 'Go woke go broke' and 'PC gone mad/looney' are used to depict political correctness as a destructive, radicalising force.

> *"Sadly, the UK is being [constantly] undermined by PC bigots and any [reference] to English ways, customs and even folklore is being removed."*

> *"Keep the sign! It's historical, and a bit of fun too. Definitely PC madness to say it must be removed."*

A report published in June 2021 by King's College London and Ipsos Mori indicates that the British public are among the most likely nationalities (of the 28 surveyed) to say that people are 'too easily offended'[34] and it is the offended who need to 'stop searching for things that might offend', rather than the alleged offenders who need to change the words they use or the names they object to. Moreover, as illustrated by the second quote below, little-known examples of "politically correct" language are cited to ridicule or undermine renaming practices as a 'nonsense.'

[34] Duffy, B. et al. (2021). *Culture wars around the world: how countries perceive divisions*. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-around-the-world-how-countries-perceive-divisions.pdf

"I can honestly say if it were a black couple washing a white kid I wouldn't GAF either! It really is time for people to stop searching for things that might offend."

"I think the sign is a positive sign, it suggests people are who they are and you shouldn't try to force them to be what they are not. Many of these PC idiots should, to use a PC term, be made biologically non-viable. It was a term used by a New York undertakers when some idiot suggested 'dead' was such pejorative word."

Echoing the conceptualisation of political correctness as a 'dictatorship of virtue',[35] online sceptics suggest that reasoning (e.g., the origins and history of pub names) is being threatened by emotional considerations (i.e. appeals to address concerns about racist names), and that those who comply are doing so to fashion themselves as 'virtuous'. "Political correctness" is being mobilised as a 'knee-jerk term of ridicule'[36] to delegitimise or dismiss the practice of renaming pubs.

[35] Browne, A. (2006). *The retreat of reason: Political correctness and the corruption of public debate in modern Britain*. Civitas.
[36] Crawley, R. (2007). Talking it out: Political correctness as resistance to anti-racism. *Equal Opportunities International, 26*(5), 497-506.

Case Study Four: Gardening

> *"One of the things I love most about gardening is its ability to cut through social divisions. Tapping into the universal human desire to nurture, as well as our instinctive fascination with the natural world, gardening has the unique ability to transcend gender, class, race, sexuality and political persuasions" (James Wong, 2020)[34].*

Gardening and race

The following pair of case studies explore the relevance of rural racism to two popular British pastimes. We illustrate the normalisation of hate, showing how online discourse not only targets large organisations and businesses, but also grassroots groups and influential individuals.

With regards to gardening, several individuals, including gardener/former professional soccer player Tayshan Hayden-Smith, and botanist James Wong, have spoken out about horticulture's diversity problem. In 2021, Hayden-Smith launched the Grow2Know project to encourage young people from diverse backgrounds to participate in gardening, admitting he had felt out of place in the garden before.[37] Meanwhile, James Wong, a botanist based in London, has noticed the significance of racism in horticulture for years. Wong received his training at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, gaining an MSc in ethnobotany from the University of Kent. He has published widely on gardening and food. He has also presented television shows, including the long-running BBC programme Countryfile.[38]

Wong's views on racism began to take centre stage around 2020 when they were featured by a number of media outlets. In a 2020 article published in *The Times*,[39] Wong referred to two types of racism. First, he criticised the culture of gardening in the UK for lacking sensitivity to issues of race. Citing the examples of 'heritage' and 'native', he addressed how such words are commonly perceived as synonymous for 'better' (e.g., better growing, better tasting, better for wildlife), regardless of the scientific reality.

Secondly, Wong pointed out that he experiences both covert and overt racism on a regular basis. He gave examples of dismissiveness and mockery in another article by

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[37] Wilson, K. (2022, May 22). From the shadow of Grenfell Tower to the Chelsea flower show ... in just five years. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/may/22/tayshan-hayden-smith-gardener-chelsea-flower-show-grenfell

[38] To learn more about James Wong: www.jameswong.co.uk

[39] Karim, F. (2020, December 19). Countryfile presenter James Wong digs in over 'gardening racism'. *The Times*. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/countryfile-presenter-james-wong-digs-in-over-gardening-racism-9pbl3wfwr

The Guardian.[40] For example, he was told by journalists at a show garden that they only worked with British designers and was on other occasions mocked about his appearance and accent.

Wong's remarks sparked a tremendous backlash, often on the grounds that gardening should be 'apolitical'[41] since it is a popular pastime for British people to unwind. Such thinking disregards not only the contemporary challenges faced by minoritised individuals, but also the history of their participation in British horticulture, which can be traced back to the times of the transatlantic slave trade, for example, when enslaved Africans assisted in collecting specimens, cultivated plants on plantation allotments and brought indigo-growing expertise to Louisianan plantations.[42]

The backlash did not deter Wong from raising the topic of racism on the British gardening scene (and beyond). For instance, he continues to alert the public, via X, to the experiences of minoritised people in the countryside, to call people out on their racial biases, and to advocate a more inclusive gardening culture. In March 2024, he was subject to widespread abuse after voicing his support for his BBC Countryfile colleague, John Craven, who showed concern about the significance of rural racism after speaking to The Rural Racism Project team.

> *"Absolutely U.K. gardening culture has racism baked into its DNA. It's so integral that when you point out it's existence, people assume you are against gardening, not racism. Epitomised, for example, by the fetishisation (and wild misuse) of words like 'heritage' and 'native'"* (James Wong, X, December 12, 2020).

Politicising gardening

The perceived implausibility of racism in British gardening prompts numerous furious reactions, the most common type being personal insults. In Wong's case, his surname is under constant mockery – being called 'Wrong' rather than 'Wong'.

> *"There's an 'r' missing in your surname!"*

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[40] Wong, J. (2020, June 14). Weeding out horticulture's race problem. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jun/14/james-wong-weeding-out-the-race-problem-in-horticulture

[41] Wong, J. (2020, November 29). Other arts are political, why not gardening? *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/nov/29/james-wong-other-arts-are-often-political-who-says-gardening-shouldnt-be-too

[42] For a brief overview of the history of Black British gardeners:
Cumberbatch, A. (2020, October 29). *The history of Black British gardeners is one of resistance*. gal-dem.com/the-history-of-black-british-gardeners-is-one-of-resistance

Furious reactions are imbued with exaggeration, sarcasm and parody. In addition to expressions of anger and frustration, people argue that gardening needs to be 'rescued' from discussions about race or racism. This is often done by being deliberately absurd (e.g., begging forgiveness from the 'plant god' for being racist).

> *"Gardening is racist. Driving is racist. Shopping is racist. Covid is racist."*
> *"I agree. Gardening is racist against vegetative life. It's colonialism and fruit murder. I pray to the Rutabaga gods for forgiveness."*

As Wong rightly recognises, mentioning gardening and racism in the same sentence risks being seen as a slur against gardening rather than racism. The introduction of the unfamiliar topic rattles the gardening enthusiasts in this case study. The issues Wong raises have, by their own admission, never crossed their minds. Neither do Wong's examples tally with their concepts of intentional racism. Consequently, they consider Wong, and those like him, to be the source of the problem.

> *"People like you seem to go out of your way to create a problem you can moan about where none previously exists....people in UK who like gardening arent thinking about politics, or race theory, they are debating what to grow, & thinking about things like slugs & caterpillars!"*

Defining racism and racist language

> *"These blanket labels paper over important nuances when it comes to gardening. Could we not judge the horticultural merit of plants on the basis of their performance rather than arbitrary human labels?"* (James Wong, The Guardian, January 10, 2021)[43]

While some people become upset or angry about discussions of race in the context of British gardening, others acknowledge the importance of attending to racism but question its relevance to gardening. According to their own accounts, most people hold their own understandings of what constitutes racism. To these, Wong's examples are 'trivial', motivated by a desire to gain media attention.

> *"I feel really sorry for people who really are victims of racism when I see tweets like this. The way the word is used now to describe any view or opinion people do not agree with is ridiculous. The concept of racism is becoming debased through trivial overuse."*

> *"Sadly this is an almost inevitable consequence of the racist garbage being thrust into media focus right now."*

Some commentators in this sample declare that they are not racist and place the onus on people who are not white to explain or rationalise what they perceive to be racist. This creates two simplified categories – minoritised groups who believe racism exists versus White sceptics - whose world views are depicted as irreconcilable.

> *"Can someone who's is NOT white explain what they actually want, I'm not racist and I'm get tarred with this brush, because I like gardening ffs am I missing something what do you want, we all get equal opportunities and rights, right? Bored with this utter crap!"*

Meanwhile, there is a massive backlash against Wong's attention to the nuances of terms such as 'native' and 'heritage'. Wong argues that such words often incorrectly imply superior performance in the garden. He acknowledges the potential benefits of growing native plants but finds such labels unnecessary and unhelpful, arguing that people might opt for plants simply because they are labelled as native, without considering their behaviours across a range of local conditions.

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[43] Wong, J. (2021, January 10). It's time to rethink our attitudes to native flora. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/jan/10/james-wong-gardens-time-to-rethink-attitudes-to-native-flora

In response, Wong was accused of weaponising words and playing language games, even though he explicitly comments that such words are not inherently racist (nor are British gardens/gardening).

> *"You are weaponising words like heritage and native, and acting in a patronising way to ethnic minorities. Your argument is as specious as me saying black bags are racist because it's where you put rubbish in. It's honestly pathetic"*

> *"if there's one thing the woke are good at, it's playing dramatic language games such as this, which freak people out when they don't know how to think for themselves. stop."*

Nationalism

At the root of the backlash is a strong sense of pride and belonging towards the country. 'This occurs everywhere' is a common argument to normalise racist actions and reasoning. It indicates no intention to change attitudes, judging that Wong is the person who needs to rethink his conclusions.

> *"I think these "wokies" are trying to erase our country first the statues offended them so they then vandalised them. Mr Wong this is Britain a country of millions of GARDENERS I suggest if the English language offends you France is very easy to get to.,then you can start on the French language and see how far that gets you."*

Wong is also frequently asked to 'leave the country' – his critiques of the mal-usage of labels and his sharing of personal encounters of racism are being treated as a groundless attack on British gardening as a whole.

> *"dont like the heritage and native things, go somewhere else. why does he think that every other country outside of the UK is allowed to preserve and appreciate their heritage and native history, but not the uk? …"*

Case Study Five: Muslim Hikers

"You can't be what you can't see" (Haroon Mota, 2023).

Muslim Hikers, hiking and diversity

Hiking might seem accessible to all, but research has repeatedly shown that minoritised groups are underrepresented in the outdoors. According to surveys conducted by Natural England, [44] 58.4% of White people visited the natural environment at least once a week in 2015/16, compared to only 39.9% of the non-White population. The figures increased for both groups in 2018/19, but more so for White people (69%, compared to 42% for people from minoritised backgrounds). The underrepresentation of minoritised groups can be attributed to not only economic and physical barriers, but also less visible barriers such as feeling conspicuous or unwelcome.[45]

Amid the lack of diversity in the outdoors, in May 2024, the National Trust announced the Walk Together Pathway project.[46] Working with eight walking groups that share the mission of increasing representation, the project aims to support training for new walk leaders who might inspire more people from minoritised groups. Among the eight walking groups is Muslim Hikers.

Muslim Hikers was launched as a walking group in July 2021. This grassroots initiative aims to promote awareness, safety and confidence in the outdoors. Through organising regular hiking events, it hopes to demonstrate to Muslims and other underrepresented communities that physical activities in outdoor spaces are accessible to them.[47]

In order to broaden its reach, Muslim Hikers has built a strong online presence and works with like-minded organisations. As of June 2024, it had over 20,000 and 46,000 followers on X and Instagram respectively. In 2023, it collaborated with Adidas Terrex and Wiggle to design a waterproof prayer mat for outdoor use. Prayer signs pointing in the direction of Mecca were also placed in the Peak District to facilitate Muslims in

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[44] Natural England (2022). *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE)*. www.gov.uk/government/collections/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-survey-purpose-and-results

[45] The Countryside Charity (2021). *Access to nature in the English countryside*. www.cpre.org.uk/resources/2021-research-overview-access-to-nature-in-the-english-countryside

[46] The National Trust (2024). *Walk Together Pathway*. www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/walking/walk-together-pathway

[47] Khossousi, Nellie. (2023). Championing diversity and inclusion in the great outdoors. *The Runnymede Trust Blog*. https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/championing-diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-great-outdoors

incorporating prayers during their hikes. In 2024, Muslim Hikers was featured in one of the stories in Arc'teryx's global campaign 'No Wasted Days'.

As Muslim Hikers became more widely known, they experienced increasing online abuse. In response, their strategy is to refrain from interacting with the abusers while also highlighting the issue of racism. They are determined to demonstrate to the wider community that online hate should not stop them from enjoying the outdoors.

Denial of barriers

> *"Why does it have to be as muslim hiking group? Why not just become a hiking group or join other hikers? Is this not another way of segregating yourself from rest of society. What has Islam to do with hiking?"*

Online sceptics are particularly triggered by the use of the word 'barriers'. There is a general disbelief in the existence of anything that could possibly preclude anyone, including minoritised people, from going for a walk in the countryside. 'Access' is defined in the most straightforward sense as having the 'right of way'; all other types of perceived barriers are seen as 'imaginary' and 'nonsense'.

> *"There is no unequal access to green space, there are no systemic barriers, stop talking such divisive nonsense."*

> *"What 'barriers'? You are speaking of open land access. You're speaking about going hiking in natural places open to the public. There are no racial barriers - you just go there! You just literally go there."*

The 'no barrier' sentiment is accompanied by a more subtle yet equally dismissive stance that there is 'no racial barrier'. In discussing the possible barriers, online commentators refer to geographical, economical and physical barriers, as well as remoteness and lack of public transportation to the hiking routes, cost of travel and hiking equipment, and fitness requirements. While online commentators acknowledge these barriers, they see them as challenges shared by everyone, regardless of race despite the fact that such groups are disproportionately affected by access issues. Minoritised people who feel unwelcome in the countryside are blamed for finding excuses, not trying hard enough to overcome the challenges, being lazy or lacking in any genuine liking or passion for nature.

> *"I'm an urbanite, I love to get out to the glorious open countryside, and so I make the physical effort to do so. The motivation lies with the individual. You greet all walks of life out there."*

Alongside no ‘real’ barriers, online sceptics often assume the power position to offer advice. The expression ‘just…’ is commonly used to emphasise the ease of accessing and enjoying the countryside.

> *“what? Literally just get a train anywhere outside of London and go for a walk lmao”*

> *“Just go out, explore and see what is out there. The countryside has no barriers 🤷‍♂️”*

Breaching the Countryside Code

In justifying the possible resentment towards Muslim Hikers (or Muslims in general), online sceptics argue that they do not follow ‘The Countryside Code’, for example, being considerate to local residents, keeping to marked paths, taking litter home. Sceptics assume the power position through representing themselves as more knowledgeable and experienced in hiking, and minoritised people as incompetent and ignorant of the etiquette in the countryside. Through the strategy of storytelling, sceptics recount their experience with minoritised people and suggest that they deserve to be poorly treated because they violate/do not show respect for the countryside code.

> *"I felt hostility & intimidation recently in Hyde Park, London. A huge grp of Muslim men praying on mats & chanting loudly, destroying the Park tranquillity."*
>
> *"The only time I ever saw Muslims in the countryside they were stealing a sheep!!"*

The association of Muslims with problems and trouble was demonstrated in a recent BBC article that raised concern about the disturbance caused by noisy night-time hikers in a village near Snowdon.[48] Without any discussion in the body text or evidence that Muslims were responsible for the disturbance, a picture of Muslims hiking during the daytime was used with the headline. While the BBC later removed the picture, this incident illustrated and promoted deep-rooted assumptions about Muslims in the British countryside.

Building barriers and invasion

Online sceptics question the necessity of foregrounding one particular identity, suggesting that the group unreasonably demands public attention and special treatment. Some sceptics offer an 'insider perspective' by explicitly identifying themselves as belonging to minoritised communities and express their disapproval of the group. This often encourages other commentators who then have their beliefs confirmed because of the misguided sense that if someone from a minoritised group affirms these suspicions, it cannot be discriminatory to say or believe.

> *"By your name you're making it clear you want special treatment when you hike. I hike and I'm Jewish, and I've not for one second considered starting ""Jewish Hikers"" Maybe I should. Seems to be a lot of cash in claiming to be a persecuted minority…"*

Since sceptics do not agree that Muslims are being locked out (in the physical sense) of the 'barricaded' countryside, they criticise them for building barriers by starting their own group rather than joining any existing walkers' groups which, they imply, would have no difficulty welcoming them. They think Muslims who wish to walk should, and can, simply blend in and deny any positive impact or psychological benefits of walking with people from similar backgrounds. Sceptics also criticise the group name as exclusive, signalling a wrong-headed preference for Muslim company. There is no recognition of the rationale for, or benefits of, foregrounding marginalised identities in group names but, as Haroon Mota, founder of Muslim Hikers, points out, 'You can't be

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[48] BBC Wales News [@@BBCWalesNews]. (2024, June 20). '*Have a good time but don't forget there's people who actually live here*' [Tweet; thumbnail link to article]. Twitter. twitter.com/BBCWalesNews/status/1803691518735077713

what you can't see.' Rather than excluding other communities from joining, the group name speaks to those who may not have considered hiking as a possibility for them before.

> *"Sounds like you've actually founded a hiking group rather than joined one. And it's a hiking group that, by its very definition, sounds divisive. Would you allow a white secular or Christian person to join your group?"*

The founding of Muslim Hikers also triggered an invasion narrative which sees some commentators criticise the group for attempting to expand their territory and 'control everything'. This is especially evident following the announcement of Muslim Hikers' partnership with Adidas Terrex and Wiggle, and the introduction of prayer signs to the Peak District. The signs are perceived not only as foreign objects that contradict the natural being of the countryside, but also territory markers. For some commentators, putting up signs is a blatant attempt to claim the public space for their own use. Muslims are depicted as more than trespassers; they are conquerors propagandising their beliefs. It is this feeling of 'being changed' that commentators are particularly uncomfortable with.

> *"I love and have walked the Peak District. Why do you need Prayer signs? It's all about Muslims trying to control everything. If I came across them I would remove them. The Peak District does not belong to the Muslims."*

> *"First put signs then next there will be a mosque and later claim the whole area."*

> *"Sorry but I dont want your prayer signs littering my countryside walks, your religion is your business, dont push it into my face."*

Nationalism

Since 2023, there has been a surge in anti-Muslim sentiment and discourse in the UK amid conflicts in the Middle East and misinformation spread by far-right and anti-immigrant groups. In August 2024, Tell MAMA found a 300% increase in verbal abuse and anti-Muslim prejudice against British Muslims since the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023.[49] The situation worsened, with violent attacks on mosques and asylum seekers' accommodation, after 29 July 2024 when three children were killed in a knife

[49] Tell MAMA. (2024). *Survey of British Muslims after October 7th shows a rise in anti-Muslim abuse*. https://tellmamauk.org/survey-of-british-muslims-after-october-7th-shows-a-rise-in-anti-muslim-abuse/

attack in Southport. Misinformation immediately spread online about the suspect being a Muslim immigrant.[50]

A common thread of this discourse is that Muslims do not uphold British values and represent a threat to British culture. In the case of Muslim Hikers, people draw on metaphors of invasion to incite racial hatred, asking Muslims to go back to 'their countries'. They assume a position of power by representing themselves as citizens of the United Kingdom while representing members of Muslim Hikers (and Muslims in general) as foreigners. Building on this 'us and them' narrative, they portray the United Kingdom as superior to other nations (especially in terms of its openness and freedom of religion and thought), then proceeding to suggest ways in which actions and beliefs of 'foreigners' are incongruent with British ways of life. According to these commentators, Muslim Hikers are 'foreigners' who need to adapt to British culture, and even feel grateful for being able to practise their faith.

> *"Sounds like you're in the wrong country then. You'd likely feel more comfortable in the lands of your ancestors. No one owes you anything."*

> *"Aren't you glad that you can practice your faith in the country where you migrated. & in the other hand your beloved country doesn't allow anyone to practice theirs & subjected to punishment?"*

[50] Milmo, D. & Quinn, B. (2024, July 31). How false online claims about Southport knife attack spread so rapidly. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/31/how-false-online-claims-about-southport-knife-attack-spread-so-rapidly

Case Study Six: Travellers

> *"Promoting a diverse range of futures for GRT members is vital in gaining greater visibility and wider societal change" (Darren, Irish Traveller)*[50].

Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers

Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers are protected racial groups under the Equality Act 2010. While each of these communities have their distinct histories and cultures,[52] they share a number of characteristics, often (but not exclusively) living nomadic lives, residing in caravans/moveable dwellings and generally being self-employed. The oral tradition is strong, as are family and community networks, and there are seasonal social gatherings, fairs and festivals.

According to the 2021 census, 71,440 people identified as Gypsy or Irish Traveller, with more than one fifth living in caravans or other temporary structures.[53] However, it is estimated that there are about 300,000 Travellers in the UK, most of whom do not mark their identity explicitly due to their lack of trust in data collection and fear of discrimination. This is not surprising given that discrimination against Travellers is commonly seen as socially 'acceptable'.[54] As reported by the Traveller Movement, Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers experience discrimination and prejudice in areas such as education, employment, healthcare, and access to services like pubs, shops and cinemas. While 77% of the survey respondents said they had been targets of hate speech or hate crime, only 23% had sought help because they felt that no one took them seriously.[55]

One of the major events among Traveller communities is the annual Appleby Horse Fair held in the town of Appleby-in-Westmorland. It sees Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers socialise with family and friends, and celebrate their cultures and identities by parading horses and carts through the town centre and trading animals and goods. In 2024, the Fair attracted around 10,000 participants from Traveller

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[51] The Traveller Movement (n.d.). *Our Impact*. https://travellermovement.org.uk/our-impact

[52] A discussion on terminologies regarding Travellers can be found here:
House of Commons UK. (2019, April 5). *Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Seventh report of session 2017-19 of the Women and Equalities Committee*. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/360.pdf

[53] Thomas, H., Standeven, C., & Wattie, S. (2023, October 13). Gypsy or Irish Traveller populations, England and Wales: Census 2021. *Office for National Statistics.* https://www.ons.gov.uk/

[54] Lally, S. (2015). Gypsies and Travellers: Their history, culture and traditions. *Community Practitioner 88*(1), 30-33.

[55] The Traveller Movement (2017). *The last acceptable form of racism? The pervasive discrimination and prejudice experienced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities*. https://wp-main.travellermovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/The-Last-Acceptable-Form-of-Racism-2017.pdf

communities and 30,000 other visitors.[56] Despite its cultural significance, the Fair is often met with inflammatory media representations and is not necessarily welcomed by local residents, who think it does not create a positive image for their town because of the perceived disorderly lawlessness of Traveller communities.[57]

Land use and legal compliance

Online commentators criticise Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers for not following laws and regulations. They emphasise the importance of the rule of law (e.g. obtaining permission for their camps, paying council tax), stating that everyone must abide by the same set of laws regardless of any human rights provision. Hostile commentators are dissatisfied with the perceived laissez-faire approach of the government and local councils, which, in their opinion, should step in and enforce the law equally. Moreover, online commentators think that Traveller communities feel entitled and 'play the minority card', using their identities/marginalised status to get special treatment, arguing that they disrupt the lives of villagers (characterised as 'law abiding', 'tax paying' and 'indigenous'). In summary, Travellers are not seen in these narratives as worthy of respect.

> *"If I were to do this in a field near me I would be kicked off quickly, I don't understand why these people are above the law. I was at a festival the other day and a caravan, pick up, and car arrived, no registration plates on any vehicle, the police need to act."*

> *"THREE legal precidents are being set here 1 Planning permission is no longer needed, 2 Travellers dont have to obey the laws we are tied to, 3 The mainstream community are discriminated against whilst travellers get free reign."*

In discussing the significance of obeying the law, online commentators frequently use council tax as an example. They doubt anyone from Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities pay any taxes, and are confused by their influence in the decisions made by local councils. Positioning themselves in opposition to these 'strangers', commentators self-identify as proud taxpayers who are thus eligible to vote for their local councillors. In their opinion, they possess the right to decide on matters related to their neighbourhood and criticise political councillors for failing to do their job.

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[56] See https://applebyfair.org/

[57] Toyn, J., & Schofield, J. (2022). Appleby New Fair: Investigating local attitudes towards a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) heritage tradition in the context of legislative change. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice, 13*(4), 459–481.

"Councils have no money, fleecing tha taxpayer with 5 to 10% increases yet they can spend money on travellers that contibute very little to society in terms of taxation. Where is the money for schools? local infrastrucutre? helping small business and shopes by lowering rates?"

Lifestyle and social integration

Online commentators discuss the itinerant cultures of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities and their relationship to the countryside, correspondingly representing them as uncivilized and greedy, always demanding more (they 'take over more and more land') and living 'rent free on whoever's land you want', exploiting legal loopholes and 'stealing' things.

"Give these people an inch and they will take a mile. Have witnessed it in north Wales where they get a pot of land and slowly take over more and more land by building fences to increase the boundary. They pay nothing and once challenged threaten and intimidate!!"

"No doubt the intolerable part of the official site is that rent has to be paid. Gypsy 'culture' is basically having the right to live rent free on whoever's land you want, not having to work, and taking whatever you need from other people."

Another representation of Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities is as troublemakers who fail to adhere to the lifestyle and norms of the wider public. Despite its cultural significance, the annual Appleby Horse Fair is framed negatively as a breeding ground for animal cruelty and antisocial behaviour. The tradition of riding horses through the river Eden is condemned as violent and inhumane, and concerns about the physical and mental health of horses are raised, with some claiming to have witnessed injured horses not receiving appropriate treatment and being left to die. As regards antisocial behaviour, hostile comments include complaints about issues of hygiene and noise, even comparing Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers with animals, unable to control themselves and fouling the countryside. Individual incidents are typically then generalised: they are 'thugs and thieves', causing a public nuisance wherever they go. A common complaint is that they are impolite and disrespectful, and should therefore expect to the same treatment in return. According to this logic, there is no discrimination, only cause and effect: it is the Traveller communities who need to change and integrate, not those who complain about them.

“I get that there is a lot of rubbish ect but no excuse for leaving it, along with a mattress and empty gas bottles ,take them with you, just pure laziness and filthy behaviour, also cruel to the horses, do they like being almost completely submerged in the water? You may be having fun love but the horse just looks terrified […]”

“My personal experience is that they are thugs and thieves. They steal anything that's not tied down, harass people in streets for money and cigarettes as well as destroying any land they camp on causing pollution and damage to fields and fencing.”

In cases where Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller groups seek to set up ‘permanent’ rural sites, their identity is seen as having been relinquished and their status as minorities with protected characteristics is consequently contested. For the

most part, they are seen as *people who travel* with a wealth of options for temporary places to stay, so long as it is *not in my back yard*.[58]

> *"Surely travellers-travel, if they want a permanent life then they aren't travellers & need to rent or buy like everyone else, therefore not a minority group that needs pandering too."*

[58] Toyn, J., & Schofield, J. (2022). Appleby New Fair: Investigating local attitudes towards a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) heritage tradition in the context of legislative change. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice, 13*(4), 459–481.

Case Study Seven: Debate Programmes

> "*I spooled through the comments which broadly came in three flavours: 'I'm not racist so there is no racism in the countryside'; 'I'm black and I've never experienced racism in the countryside'; and importantly, 'I have experienced racism in the countryside'."* (Ellie Harrison, 2020)[58].

The major debates

These case studies illustrate how the topic of race and racism has become pertinent to people from different communities as they navigate the countryside. Various stakeholders including charities, businesses, outdoor groups and those who are racialised are advocating for a more inclusive countryside, and there are increasingly numerous and focused equality and awareness-raising campaigns. In March 2024, for example, the North Face company offered discount for customers who completed the 'Allyship in the Outdoors' course, covering topics like 'White privilege in the outdoors' and 'challenging racism'.[59] As already discussed, such inclusion efforts often provoke a backlash, amplified by mainstream media.

In September 2019, in reviewing how well the countryside supported communities, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs reported that it was seen by minoritised groups as a 'White' environment that held little relevance for them.[60] This finding was later referred to on BBC *Countryfile* in June 2020, amid the Black Lives Matter protests, when Dwayne Fields delved into the challenges facing minoritised people who live in the countryside. CPRE, the countryside charity, also responded to the growing concern about everyday rural racism by issuing a statement about ending racial inequalities and achieving a countryside that is accessible to all.[61] These narratives were picked up by mainstream media and popular media personalities, producing programmes which sparked furious debate.

In June 2020, TalkRadio invited guests to respond to the question 'Is Britain's countryside racist?': Calvin Robinson, a campaigner for 'Defund The BBC' and a person of colour, commented that the BBC are appealing to the 'woke progressives',

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[59] Corless, B. (2024, March 5). Want money off North Face clothing? You'll have to complete a 'racial inclusion' course first. *The Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/03/05/the-north-face-discount-racial-inclusion-course-outdoors/

[60] Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. (2019, September). *Landscapes Review. Final report*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/833726/landscapes-review-final-report.pdf

[61] CPRE. (2020, June). *CPRE statement against racism in the countryside*. https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/cpre-statement-against-racism-in-the-countryside/

arguing that it makes no sense to say racism is everywhere;[62] CPRE's Tom Fyans said there are inequalities and we need to 'start listening a lot more to the voices of those lived experiences of minoritised individuals who are experiencing a very different countryside'.[63] In January 2023, the question 'Is the countryside racist or unwelcoming to ethnic minorities?' was asked on the show Free Speech Nation by *GB News*. The discussion focused on a 'hyper-racialised identity politics' that makes people notice their differences more.[64]

In November 2023, the Wildlife and Countryside Link reported that minoritised communities face a multitude of structural, experiential and cultural barriers.[65] The report was picked up by *Talk TV* in February 2024 when the panel collectively dismissed the narrative that 'visiting the countryside is a White experience' as 'an egregious example of extreme wokery gone mad'.[66] Against the backdrop of the continual debates on the question 'Is the countryside racist?', this case study examines the backlash against even raising the topic, and its implications for understanding the countryside and racism.

Defending the rural

In the UK, rurality lies close to the heart of many, and it is commonly associated with close-knit communities.[67] The online commentators who self-identify as rural residents whose remarks feature in these case studies commonly express a desire to protect the status quo by resisting changes which might unsettle established ways of being, typically representing this as a traditional British way of life. Frequently, they suggest that the feelings of minoritised groups do not evidence discrimination per se, but are best described as feeling lost in an unfamiliar land – they are seen as outsiders who are not British, or not British enough. Notions of indigeneity and intergenerational belonging are sometimes evoked to argue this.

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[62] TalkTV. (2020, June 29). *Is the countryside racist? BBC sparks race row after claiming BAME community feel unwelcome*. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmt_XveOVAQ
[63] TalkTV. (2020, June 30). *Is Britain's countryside 'racist'?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7uznLqRfng
[64] GBNews. (2023, January 8). *Is the countryside 'racist' or 'unwelcoming to ethnic minorities?'* | *Free Speech Nation* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqILGGXuqGs
[65] Wildlife and Countryside Link. (2023). *Race and the Environmental Emergency: Call for Written Evidence*. *Wildlife and Countryside Link response – November 2023.* https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/WCL_Response_Race_and_the_Environmental_Emergency_November_2023.pdf
[66] TalkTV. (2024, February 9). *"Extreme Wokery Gone MAD" Kevin O'Sullivan On Charities Branding Countryside 'Racist And Colonial'* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aob8mgLP5j8
[67] Cloke, P., & Milbourne, P. (1992). Deprivation and lifestyles in rural Wales. —II. Rurality and the cultural dimension. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *8*(4), 359-371.

> *"Maybe it's not discrimination that makes them uncomfortable. Maybe it's that quiet inner voice in their head that whispers 'this wasn't made for you' when they look out over a landscape shaped by generation upon generation of Brits. I've been all over the world and seen some beautiful places, but my homeland is where I feel connected to the past - my ancestors lived and died for this country, and their bones are in its soil. I imagine that it must feel profoundly upsetting to live somewhere where you don't feel that sense of connection."*

> *"I live in a very rural village where everyone knows everyone. We are very set in our ways and don't appreciate any outsiders, whatever colour, upsetting our routines. I have lived in my house for 20 years but I am still regarded as a newcomer. I don't think it's the sort of life a coloured person would want."*

Among the narratives we examined, there remains a tendency to contrast the rural with the urban, a tendency long observed in works like *The Country and the City* (1973) by the cultural critic, Raymond Williams. In this discourse, the countryside is presented as a sanctuary from urban pollution, alien values and centres of immigration. Online comments from those identifying as rural residents include many exhortations to city-dwellers not to despoil rural settings with 'low standards of behaviour', nor force self-proclaimed 'better' lifestyles onto them. Such sentiments are also echoed by those

who identify as ‘outsiders’ but nonetheless defend the ‘right’ of rural people to stay away from ‘all the nonsense’ associated with cities and be wary of visitors in order to protect their way of life.

> *“I live in a rural area and have never seen anything racist against black people . But I would give anyone going into rural areas advice to respect the local people and don't try bring your city low standards of behaviour to the country. […] The other bit you seem to miss is a lot of the houses in rural areas are owned by city people. Who try and force city type lifestyles on rural people we didn't ask or want city lifestyles.”*

> *“You can claim what you have built, what you have worked for and what belongs to you. Everything else is someone else’s and it is their right to live there. It does not belong to you.”*

Diversity is another popular topic for discussion, regardless of whether or not the people discussing it are rural residents. Characteristic comments take the form of complaints about mass migration or claims that multiculturalism has been forced on them without their consent. Much online commentary suggests that ‘escaping diversity’ is a driving force behind moving to the countryside, noting that avoiding interacting with people of different heritages, with whom they feel they have little in common, is a personal preference. Accusations of racism are countered with claims that diversity itself fosters racism.

> *“It was growing up in a "diverse area" i.e Birmingham that made me racist. I moved to a small mainly white town because that's the culture I want around me because I'm English and want to live in England.”*

> *“I fundamentally disagree that growing up I a diverse area created tolerance of other races. In fact it would be more true to say that living in an area that is more diverse actually breeds racism, especially when you have minorities crying foul constantly blaming all their woes on racism.”*

Contesting established definitions of racism

> *“As a young man I did a walk which included passing through several rural villages, I found the people to be unfriendly and rejecting. I am a middle-class white male. Villages being unfriendly is not a racist thing, it's just a village thing.”*

The backlash against raising the topic of racism in the countryside stems from contesting established definitions of racism as a concept and a practice. Talking about

racism and the countryside in the same sentence triggers expressions of bewilderment. Comments centre on the idea that rural areas are being unfairly accused while racism in urban areas is overlooked. The very term ‘rural racism’ is widely questioned in the comments collected for these backlash case studies. The term is designed to focus on unique challenges facing minoritised groups in the countryside but hostile online comments view rural racism as a fabricated idea or an exaggerated concern. Additionally, this group of commentators have no issue with the countryside’s demographics, unrepresentative as this is of the national population. The suggestion that there are barriers to access are rejected, while the underrepresentation of minoritised groups are attributed to personal choices and practical considerations. These alternative explanations include: there being fewer employment opportunities; it being expensive to travel to or reside in the countryside; and to minoritised groups preferring bustling city life.

> *“"How to access the countryside 101": Get it car, or bus, and take a trip to the country. Enjoy the country side, return. My family was very poor when I was little, but we managed to use a big thing with lots of seats in it to get there, now what’s it called again, ah yes a BUS! We used a bus before we could afford one of those new fangled car contraptions! I get that its harder to visit the county if you choose to live in a massive city, but that’s your choice to live there. This has nothing to do with racism at all.”*

> *“I wouldn't expect anyone to make any accommodations for me if I moved to a new area, if you as an individual are genuinely experiencing racism that's of course a different issue but people not making you feel welcome doesn't equate to racism. You're not a strangers responsibility.”*

Debates about whether ‘racism’ exists in the countryside centred on claims that the term is being overused and/or misused. Among those who question that rural racism is an issue at all, there is strong resistance to any self-identification as racist. Denial of a person’s own racism is a particularly common response to discussions about the concept of rural racism itself, and this in turn frequently prompts reflections about what constitutes racism. Even the most outspoken online commentators, including those words clearly fall within established definitions of racism, frequently claim that ‘racism’ is wrong but simultaneously deny or dismiss accounts of racism by minoritised groups.

> *“They mean it’s full of white people. That isn’t racist. Not letting blacks buy houses in the countryside would be racist. And there is no discrimination in property purchase laws. It’s load of nonsense - as always.”*

“Most people will agree that racism is wrong, and everybody should be treated the same, no matter what colour their skin is. Accusing a dominantly white community of being too white is having the opposite effect, and adding to the racism, in my opinion.”

Case Study Eight: Research and Backlash

> *"There are subtler moments of "unconscious racism" in the countryside that aren't wilful but are still difficult to be on the receiving end of. On a field trip to a National Trust property with a White colleague, it was striking how many of the White people we encountered would acknowledge her but not me"* (Dr Viji Kuppan, 2024).

Rural racism as an academic subject

After reporting on the backlash against discussions of race and racism in a variety of rural contexts, this final case study explores the backlash experienced by the researchers themselves. Research on rural racism is not new. The 2004 book *Rural Racism*, edited by Professor Neil Chakraborti (the project lead) and Professor Jon Garland, showed that minoritised communities are adversely affected by simplistic and singular constructions of rurality and a 'no racism here' mentality.[68] 20 years later, rural racism has received increasing attention from various countryside agencies yet, more generally, it continues to be viewed as peripheral to 'real' racism. What does this mean for researchers who study racism in rural contexts?

In March 2023, the Rural Racism Project was first announced by The Centre for Hate Studies on *X* and was featured in a news page at the University of Leicester.[69] The project officially launched in October 2023. During year one of the project, we engaged in a number of public-facing activities and shared research updates through blogs, featured articles and social media. In December 2023, the project was featured in the *Eastern Eye* newspaper, where Dr Viji Kuppan shared his personal experience of racism in the West Yorkshire village of Howarth.[70] In April 2024, Dr Rachel Keighley published a call to action explaining how we could work together to re-story the countryside.[71] In the same month Professor Corinne Fowler shared her personal experience of being targeted online at the centre of Britain's first culture war following her co-authorship of the National Trust report on its country houses' connections to empire, which had been published back in 2020.[72]

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[68] Chakraborti, N., & Garland, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Rural racism*. Willan Publishing.
[69] University of Leicester (2023, March 29). *University of Leicester commissioned to undertake pioneering research into rural racism by Leverhulme Trust*. [Press release]. https://le.ac.uk/news/2023/march/rural-racism
[70] Roy, A. (2023, December 22). Study seeks to expose reality of racism in rural England. *Eastern Eye*. https://www.easterneye.biz/racism-in-rural-england-leicester-university-study/
[71] Keighley, R. (2024, April 18). Making Research Count: Towards an Inclusive Countryside. *Citizen Writes*. https://citizen.le.ac.uk/blog/inclusive-countryside/
[72] Fowler, C. (2024, April 22). My writing on colonialism made me a hate figure – so I replied to my trolls. *The Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/22/corrine-fowler-national-trust-report-on-colonialism-trolls/

This case study represents the first attempt to empirically record and analyse online abuse directed at the Rural Racism Project as we set about our research. Colleagues working on this topic are typically ridiculed or abused on social media or by email, are targeted by influential newspaper columnists or online commentators and also receive direct threats against their personal safety. While researchers generally choose to remain silent about their experiences, our aim here is to document and discuss the hostility and backlash often encountered by researchers working in contested fields. The targeting of researchers simply for studying the topic is in itself revealing of the scale of the challenge, given the strength of resistance to acknowledging – and therefore addressing – rural racism. By bringing these experiences to light, we also hope to raise awareness of the challenges faced by researchers in this field and contribute to discussions on how to better protect and support scholars working on sensitive topics.

Research bias

When newspapers feature the topic of rural racism, they often cite the work of academic researchers, sometimes referring to them as 'experts'. This word-choice triggers a clear backlash, characterised by dismissal of their expertise: researchers are 'self-proclaimed experts', 'disinformation experts', 'loons', 'clowns', 'anti-White', 'infected roaches', 'actual racists in fake jobs', 'race-baiters', and 'opinionated woke bigots'. The relevance or credibility of hate studies or colonialism, as viable topics of study, are frequently questioned.

> *"The trouble with experts, is that they need to prove they are experts. No doubt they will find whatever nonsense they are looking for. They will produce a report. And for a while lefty snobs in the media & elsewhere will lap it up as truth & create a tiny bit more resentment."*

> *"What on earth is a 'hate crime expert?' Distinct rural racism amongst cow slips; and as for those dairy cattle-fascists the lot of them! George Orwell wasn't too far from the truth was he? Just what is this country coming to?"*

The distrust in the expertise of researchers investigating rural racism prompts online criticism that academics are falling prey to confirmation bias, selecting examples of racism based on preconceived beliefs and producing opinion pieces rather than evidence-based work. For these commentators, researchers in hate studies are employed to find hate, or are justifying their salary by researching non-issues. These cohorts of commentators have no confidence in the likelihood of research rigour and dismiss the idea that any systematic steps will be adhered, such as proper research

design, the application of suitable methodologies and arrival at any legitimate findings which might be evidence-based, replicable and genuinely open to critique.[73]

> *"Is it not true that if you look hard enough for something, you will eventually find it? I feel that this study is going to find racism before they've even started looking because if there is racism in the city why not the countryside?"*

> *"It is not a question of factual accuracy. It is a question of which facts are reported and which suppressed. This is classic Guardian level disingenuity - big wide eyes, "But everything we said is true..."*

These online expressions of doubt about the legitimacy of research into rural racism are often explicitly linked to the ethnicity of the researchers involved. On X, Talk TV alluded to the Rural Racism Project and posted an unrelated image of Black people in the countryside, which many who read the post assumed was a photograph of the research team. Those who posted in response suggested that researchers in this area should be mainly White because of the perceived fragility or purported victim mentality of academics from marginalised groups.

> *"Funny how they are all black … maybe if the diversify and accept their fragility they may not be so xenophobic."*

> *"Don't see too many white people assisting on this enquiry. Have the jury already come to a verdict before seeing the evidence? 🤨🙄"*

Research as worthless to society

Criticism about the lack of expertise is best contextualised in terms of wider public scepticism about the value of research in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Academics have long, and sometimes justifiably, been accused of living in ivory towers, and this idea heavily influences the perception of research into rural racism, again giving rise to feelings that academia is disconnected to 'real-world' problems like the domestic economic crisis or wider global problems.

> *"Academics spend their entire careers reading other academics works then desperately search for a new niche within the existing morass of paper. Corinne Fowler found hers. But rest assured there will be another useless unemployable elsewhere cab off the rank in the near future to tear to pieces her contribution to the landfill of academic works …"*

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[73] Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American journal of pharmaceutical education, 84*(1), 138-146.

> *“Two years at what cost to fabricate rubbish? Why don't you people focus on things like the fact the world is running out of potable water, people in Africa have no food, women in Afghanistan are barred from education - plenty of worthy topics yet you focus on this NONSENSE????”*

In this rhetoric of worthlessness, ‘rural racism’ appears to exist simply because researchers try too hard to look for it. Efforts to expose and address such racism are posited as actually exacerbating that racism. To some online commentators, the best solution to racism would be to stop talking about it at all. Alternatively, as also suggested, to cease looking at rural experience ‘through the prism of race’.

> *“What's with the county, every investigation or study being done in this country seems to be about words ending in 'ism', 'ist' or 'ic'. Police, fire, countryside, what next.... ?”*

> *“A wise man once said ' How are we going to get rid of racism? Stop talking about it' - Morgan Freeman.”*

Reflection: Research on online backlash

Conducting research into the online backlash is not an easy task, especially when researchers themselves become subject to harassment. Reflecting on our collective experience of data collection and analysis provides a valuable opportunity for us not only to reflect on the emotional dimensions of this research but to also contribute to setting best practice guidance for future enquiries into negativity online.

The most obvious and direct impact on researchers was an emotional one. It is gruelling and disheartening to read and analyse hundreds of hateful online comments every day. It is also challenging to read attempts to invalidate work that is emotionally demanding, regardless of our awareness that we would encounter expressions of racism and hate, this did not insulate us from any emotional response to it.

To support the research team, we obtained funds from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to appoint a counsellor who specialised in addressing the harms of racism to organise reflective practice meetings which created space to talk over the work’s psychological demands. This support was extended to all our interviewees for the project, 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 vital to the goal of safeguarding and an ethics of care, part of an overall hope – accompanied by this practical step – 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, even when comments are produced by bots, a sinister phenomenon worth studying in its own right.

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

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