

# Think Piece on Anti-Racism in the UK Film & TV Industry

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FILM+TV  
CHARITY

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# Introduction

The Film and TV Charity identified they had not done enough to recognise racism in the industry, and that this affected their ability to provide support to people working behind the scenes in film and TV. As a result, they launched an Anti-Racism Platform to support those in the industry trying to drive anti-discriminatory work, and at the beginning of 2021, I was seconded into the Charity from the Public Sector where I have worked for nearly 10 years with a commitment to anti-racism and systemic solutions to inequity. My independence and experience allowed me to scope meaningful action the Charity, and industry as a whole, could take. Like many in the industry, but also globally, the Charity has gone on a journey to understand what it means to be 'anti-racist'; this think piece targets those who are still on this journey.

### **Anti-racism involves actively and deliberately taking action against all forms of racism.**

For this to happen, all forms of racism must first be recognised and then understood. Racism is often mistakenly understood as being only action which involves direct and intentional racial hatred or abuse. This overlooks the existence of indirect discrimination, unconscious bias and microaggressions and, perhaps most prevalent and unrecognised in the industry, structural and institutional racism which systematically excludes people of colour and is upheld by individuals complicit in maintaining these structures.

Unlike many other sectors, the unequal treatment of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic workers in film and TV is not a new conversation: an extensive body of work on improving 'creative diversity' existed long before 2020, including an abundance of schemes, research, and many personal testimonials. This debate came to a head in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd, with thousands of people across the industry signing open letters, posting black squares on social media, and making various public commitments to being anti-racist. Despite this, there remain ongoing claims from people of colour that change and action is not coming fast enough, that they are not being heard and that racism continues to be a problem. Powerful pieces from people with lived experience such as Jemma Desai, Kolton Lee, Marcus Ryder, and Lenny Henry OBE are only a few of the important accounts calling for action. As an outsider to the industry, I found a striking disconnect between anti-racism 'action' and the lived experience of people of colour.

I have chosen to use the term 'people of colour' in this piece as it was the description most used by interviewees. While terminology is crucial and widely debated, I think a long analysis on my choice would be a distraction.

### **Methodology – who did you speak to and was your selection balanced?**

In total, the accounts of **55 people** holding a variety of positions across film and TV informed this piece. I personally interviewed 40 people and received 15 written submissions. The majority of interviews were with people of colour who had lived experience of racism. However, I also interviewed seven White people working on the anti-racism diversity agenda within institutions.

I interviewed people with different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds from Black British, Asian British, Mixed heritage and those who identify as first and second-generation migrants – including of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Ghanaian, Nigerian, Jamaican,

Saudi, Malaysian, Thai and Chinese ancestry. For each industry role, I interviewed people identifying with a range of gender and racial backgrounds – for example, not all Directors were Black women.

There is a wide array of jobs and skills in the industry and I decided to narrow my focus to those working in off-screen roles with an editorial slant or control. I made this choice because essentially this is where the power lies; improving diversity in these parts of the industry will ultimately improve on-screen representation. 10 interviewees worked purely in film and 10 solely in TV, but interestingly 20 worked across both disciplines. These roles included: Producers, Directors, Writers, and those in production and development. Some of the interviewees had experience in a range of these roles – from Exec level to very junior, but the majority were Producers or Directors with a number of credits, some with notable success.

I spoke to people who have lived experience of marginalisation in the industry and now focus on championing diversity and anti-racism in the industry. Many of these individuals self-fund projects which are carried out alongside day jobs and are not adequately supported by teams or budgets. For the purpose of this think-piece, these are referred to as ‘community-led interventions’. ‘Community’ is an overused, ambiguous and for some a ‘hammy’ term, but in this context it means work designed and led by Black, Asian or minority ethnic people in the industry.

I also offered institutions the opportunity to share their reflections on this agenda, discuss what they think has and hasn’t worked, and help find a productive way to move forward. For those who participated, many acknowledged fragility and nervousness about ‘saying the wrong thing’, or being ‘called out in the press’.

### **How did I work to capture personal reflections on race in the industry?**

As an independent, I had the rare opportunity to offer a safe space to people of colour to share their experiences and thoughts on anti-racism in the industry.

For those in a ‘minority’ in their workplace, reporting lived experience and speaking up about race often involves repercussions, and this jeopardy is amplified when the industry is as small and interconnected as film and TV. The majority of interviewees noted feeling there is not a safe space to talk about racism in the industry without being branded as a ‘trouble-maker’ or ‘blacklisted’. For this reason, I took extreme care to collate findings without personal reference to individuals.

I explained that I was offering a safe space to talk about views on anti-racism in the industry, and an opportunity to disclose any relevant individual experience or insight.

I was careful not to ask leading or prescriptive questions – only intervening to ask interviewees to expand or clarify their points – in order for this piece to lead with authentic views and voices before concluding with some of my own reflections.

The interviews specifically focus on racism because it often gets lost within broader diversity conversations. There will be patterns that correlate with other groups facing marginalisation. The interviewees identify in many ways – whether it be around gender,

class, nationality, sexuality, faith or just as being a creative. Such intersectionality, which is often overlooked, is discussed at several points in this piece.

### **Are more conversations needed? Why not just read the existing diversity reports?**

In almost all other public industries, there would be an accountability body or inquiry where I would be able to find a report with an overview evaluating the success of interventions and progress. Unfortunately – and problematically – **there is no formal accountability on racism in the industry.**

Many of the commitments made by large institutions in the UK point to ‘diversity schemes’. There are strong and very mixed views as to whether these are valuable or simply performative. There is also no central record in existence that evaluates all the anti-racist work in the sector. In scoping the project I hoped to comprehensively map these schemes.

Having examined over 100 schemes in a range of institutions, it was almost impossible to find clear, robust public evaluations of their impact, and therefore to map any clear data trends for individual smaller schemes. A common concern with improving ‘creative diversity’ was evident, but few aimed to address the specifics of tackling racism – or ableism, misogyny, homophobia or classism, all of which can play into racism and add further barriers. The majority of schemes target under-represented groups broadly, but relatively few exclusively supported Black, Asian and other minority ethnic workers in the industry. Predominantly, the focus has been on new entrants or those early in their career, though in recent years more programmes have looked at mid-level talent and progression.

Information about past schemes seems to have disappeared from many of the relevant websites, which may reflect how these schemes were intended as temporary interventions. Perhaps they depended on being championed by key staff with a personal passion for change, as opposed to stemming from a directive from the top for a mainstreamed long-term programme. If this was the case, then it would follow that when the staff champion in question moved on to a new job elsewhere their initiatives would have been at particular risk of going with them.

Without robust evaluation, it is a challenge to understand and assess how many of these temporary schemes informed structural and permanent changes. In other words, do diversity initiatives ever inform a broadcaster’s overall hiring practice? Without transparent outcomes and analysis, how is it possible to contest the claim that individual schemes are more than performative, and are, in fact, making radical structural impact? It was crucial to understand this.

## Dr Clive Nwonka And Professor Sarita Malik: Racial Diversity Initiatives in UK Film & TV

I commissioned Dr Clive Nwonka and Prof. Sarita Malik – two leading academics in the film and TV industry – to take this exploration further. In their own words, their (unique) report:

... provides an examination of various significant diversity policies, schemes and initiatives that have been generated by UKF&TV [UK film and TV] organisations over the last two decades. These are policies, schemes and initiatives that are significant and publicly available. We do not seek to represent all diversity interventions in the UKF&TV sector, which would be beyond the scope of this report. We seek to contribute to the public discussion about how the industry can collectively develop not just a language but a *practice* of equality and inclusion. Such a commitment, we suggest, has to function as a sustained and socially responsive intervention into the racial inequalities that are still embedded in the sector.

Their report highlights the problems with the evaluation and accountability of diversity outcomes and reporting within the sector. They note, for example: how the language of ‘diversity’ within UK film and TV has evolved over the past twenty years, shifting between diversity and anti-racism; the lack of investment in addressing structural dimensions of exclusion; and how many of the diversity schemes focus on young and emerging talent. I was particularly struck by the finding that there is an ‘over-emphasis on quantitative data over qualitative data and tremendous scope to increase the knowledge-base with qualitative-led research that examines how racism affects individuals personally and professionally.’

While the 55 people interviewed here do not qualify as a large statistical sample, I wanted to bring together a collection of lived experiences to contribute to this space. And I would encourage the industry to not solely focus on targets and numbers – celebrating marginal increases in representation in some areas – without understanding the reality of what it’s like for people of colour to work in the industry.

Dr Nwonka and Prof. Malik’s report complements this Think Piece with some evidenced, robust recommendations on how the industry could improve the effort to tackle racism. It is highly recommended and I have referenced it throughout this piece.

### What have I heard in the conversations informing this think piece?

All my interviews revealed some remarkably common experiences. While there was wide consensus that racism in the industry was rife, the majority of people of colour wanted to speak about structural racism. They spoke of a structure based on relationships that maintained the status quo and systemically excludes people of colour. They outlined challenges facing people of colour navigating this racist structure, with lack of sponsorship and freedom to make mistakes and grow, stuck in ‘assistant roles’ and unable to progress, and being under-credited. Strikingly there is little trust in and opportunity

for people of colour to tell their own stories authentically, and an exhausting process to overcome this. There was an overwhelming sense of people of colour wanting freedom to make work and tell their own stories, but also to avoid racism at work. Many highlighted how not having space to speak about racism without consequence has impacted their mental health. They also highlighted the lack of accountability for individuals and institutions. There was some powerful work being done by people of colour, exhausted by the lack of progress, and taking anti-racism action into their own hands. They wanted to be given funding and freedom to support meaningful structural change.

My findings from these interviews led me to steer a radical review of procedures and policies, and the Film and TV Charity has now committed to ringfence 30% of their future grant spend to Black, Asian and other minority ethnic workers in the industry. They have also committed to a long-term investment to support 'community led', often underfunded, anti-racist interventions with an initial £1m investment. These are bold, sufficiently funded interventions to meaningfully support people of colour in the industry going forward. This is just the start, and I have pointed to action the Charity and the sector should be taking in the conclusion.

These conversations were hard and triggering for many; they may also be triggering for some readers. I want to thank all those who shared. I hope their experiences are heard.

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# **Section 1: Racism is Rife in the Industry – But Does the Industry Understand What Racism Is?**

Every interviewee acknowledged the lack of diversity in the industry, and of the 55 interviewees no person of colour said they hadn't experienced racism in the film and TV industry. People from all races described occasions on set with other colleagues where they experienced feelings of being disrespected and 'othered' because of their race. One interviewee said powerfully: 'It's quite simple really – I would just like to be able to turn up to do my job without racism and sexism.'

Several interviewees said racism was something they tried to ignore to get on with their jobs. One person described it as the 'dirty side of the industry'. Others said they rely on WhatsApp groups with other people of colour in the industry to speak about racism as it is the only safe space to do so. Several interviewees stated – without being asked – that they believed that the industry specifically has an issue with racism, and a few made the point that while it is related to broader systemic inequality in society, racism in the industry goes further.

There were a number of accounts of interpersonal racism, which ranged from more acute racial bias and harassment through to microaggressions and 'unconscious bias'. There were examples of obvious racial prejudice and discrimination, such as asking the only Black women on set to 'twerk', or asking for 'someone else who is a native English speaker' – despite the Black interviewee being 'born and raised here [in the UK] and having an English Literature degree'.

There were even more examples of microaggressions, such as asking a Black woman why she doesn't 'talk like other Black people and is so articulate?' One Black interviewee was asked, 'Why don't you wear tracksuits?' and another recounted being asked on set, 'Why do you wear tracksuits?' Both queried why there was so much interest in this and whether White colleagues would face the same question.

Notably, **most of the examples and comments were about structural racism and discrimination.**

### **If decision makers do not know any people of colour, how will people of colour get work?**

Many interviewees recognised the relationship-based, fast-paced and often informal approach to recruitment at many levels of the industry. 'References' and 'being asked in', or 'asking for meetings' were cited as ways people get work. Commissioning and funding decisions are considered '**high risk**' by those making them – especially where there are big budgets and, in some cases, public money. This results in a clear incentive to hire people who they feel confident will do the job well. This often translates as commissioning people and production companies they already know or have worked with before. While this may be normal practice, especially when done above board rather than informally, unsurprisingly it poses challenges for under-represented groups. Every participant acknowledged that the UK film and TV industry is relatively small, with a few key institutions, decision makers and 'gate keepers'. The lack of robust recruitment, procurement, or HR systems across the industry makes it much harder to avoid nepotism, racism, and discrimination – whether it is conscious or unconscious. One interviewee summarised a point that many others made: 'We always hear about risk [taking] – but it's commonplace in the industry and literally always applied, so why not to people of colour?' Many interviewees perceived a tendency among decision makers to want to endorse the

‘new in-thing’ and ‘young fresh talent out of film school’, but noted that they were usually White and often from a privileged background.

### **Does the ‘in crowd’ unintentionally or intentionally stop others from succeeding?**

Many interviewees spoke about the close network of decision makers, commissioners, and heads of successful production companies and how they were ‘nearly exclusively White and from privileged backgrounds’. Being part of that network was perceived as immensely beneficial and the way to build wealth in the industry. Many spoke of feelings of **imposter syndrome** with comments such as, ‘How am I supposed to have these networks, or penetrate this inner circle when we come from a completely different social background and when everyone else in the room has known each other since university?’

Many highlighted that the cultivation of **protégés** is commonplace in the industry, with young talent being supported by more senior established talent and then given an abundance of opportunities. Examples were given of instances where people have picked mentees – or those they want to support – literally in their own image. They argued that it’s harder to be sponsored, or build a relationship, when you are from a different background and a minority, and so harder to build rapport and trust.

Some spoke of scenarios with protégées often taking jobs previously held by their mentors, therefore maintaining the status quo and perpetuating reciprocal relationships between key decision-makers and gatekeepers.

One interviewee explained:

If you are a commissioner and going on to start up your own production company, it makes sense to leave a protégé in your position as it will be easy for your future projects to get commissioned.

Another described a different scenario, where commissioners within a broadcaster will feed work to a production company to ensure a healthy position when they join that company at a later date.

BAME-led’ production companies struggling to get through the door and grow are losing out on this way of making money, which White colleagues with the same skills but better networks can access.

Both scenarios show how closely linked and reciprocal professional relationships can be, and how excluding this is for those outside of that network of rapport.

One interviewee observed how many Assistant Commissioners from a more diverse pool, already skilled and ready to be promoted, lose out to less skilled young White men.

Interestingly, several interviewees noted that the person who gave them opportunities was

another person of colour, or someone who had experience of being discriminated against and marginalised.

One interviewee said,

Even if we have a good conversation and the relationship feels positive, when I ask for money, a commission, or make any other kind of serious ask I face 'nos' and niceties.

This sentiment was repeated by many others.

A few Producers spoke of the challenge of trying to persuade an all-White Exec and commissioning team or bigger partnering production companies to hire Black or Brown Directors, especially when they didn't know the Director personally or know anyone else who did. Later, I will explore examples where a person who has spoken up about racism finds that this comes up in the reference process, and then blocks opportunities for which they were initially in the running.

One interviewee recalled several occasions where the team she worked in overlooked qualified people of colour when hiring juniors because 'they didn't fit the look for the team'. Being the only person of colour in the team she found it hard to challenge this, commenting that her voice 'wasn't loud enough to make a difference.' Similarly, other interviewees – some of them very senior – said that 'everyone claims they want more voices in the room' but that in their experience the truth 'is actually the opposite'.

Many felt that decision making and hiring practices were 'opaque'. One interviewee said, 'I genuinely don't know when these opportunities come up, or what hoops I need to jump through to get them.' Another interviewee, who works with talent across all marginalised groups and protected characteristics, noted that one challenge specific to people of colour is the **lack of feedback** they get. They continued to explain that for the disabled talent, women, or White working-class people there was usually more detailed explanation of why they had been rejected for an opportunity, including some constructive feedback. They wondered whether this was because people were more 'nervous about being racist'. Another reading could be they didn't have clear rationale for the rejection.

All the **interviewees of colour wanted fair access to paid opportunities and freedom to make work**. An important related idea is that '**credits are capital**'. This ask has become louder in the wake of Black Lives Matter.

### **Has the 'Black Lives Matter' movement addressed structural racism in the industry?**

All interviewees acknowledged how, after the murder of **George Floyd**, there was a widespread awareness of whiteness of teams, of decision makers, and of upcoming project slates. There was a subsequent surge of requests and engagement with people of colour in the industry. Experiences varied. Some felt it would have a significant impact on the diversity of the slates at different institutions and production companies, and this will be seen in the next few years. A few interviewees said that they have never been as busy

as they are now: people who ‘ignored them for years are now asking for meetings’, often for projects already in development by all White teams. The lack of opportunities to tell their own stories was a challenge that will be unpacked further in the next section.

With arguably more people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in work – even if not making their own projects – some interviewees noted there is now a sudden scarcity of experienced people of colour available to work in the industry. A few explained the reason for this is that talent pool has suddenly been stretched thin, and historically there hasn’t been enough investment in nurturing and retaining this talent.

Some worried that with this sudden ‘**reactive trend**’ to have someone of colour in their company or production, people are being hired for roles before they are ready or asked to write without the necessary support. If and when they fail to deliver, this will do damage to both to the individuals’ careers and also to wider perceptions of Black and Brown talent.

Many said that what’s most needed are paid opportunities, but also **genuine sponsorship** and support to grow and make mistakes. They stated how many White colleagues are given big opportunities and are able to make lots of mediocre work before they make their ‘masterpieces’, whereas a few interviewees of colour, especially Black interviewees, said they felt the pressure to be excellent straight away – if the work wasn’t impeccable (on a low-budget) they wouldn’t get recognised.

This chimed with the large proportion of interviewees who said the responses to BLM have been reactive and light touch, with only a few institutions making meaningful funding commitments and creating new opportunities. Several interviewees said that when they, as one of the few Directors, Producers, or Writers of colour, contacted the broadcasters and big institutions wanting to understand how they could access these new opportunities, these *still* felt inaccessible. People sighted ‘no or slow responses’. Many said they were asked for ‘unpaid conversations’ and to sit on panels, but then the promise for follow up conversations about commissioning work or discussing projects ‘went silent’ or ‘came to nothing’. One interviewee summarised this powerfully:

There has been no difference since BLM, lots of talking but no change. There is a lot of compliance... a lot of Black people are ready to forgo their forthrightness and their own opinions and expectations to get work... ‘there is some money out here and come and get it’ but the caveat is ‘get it on my terms, not your terms’.

The few individuals and ‘community-led’ organisations involved in the fight to improve creative diversity on a long-standing basis have been flooded with requests and work offers. Interestingly, however, many of these said they are being asked to produce a huge amount of work and offered budget for specific projects – but little investment in their time, or adequate funding to support their organisation to become sustainable and grow meaningfully. One interviewee explained:

While 90% of institutions have committed to anti-racism publicly, internally many have no idea what that meant... People do not understand that they have to change the way they work, and who they work with. The belief was – we just hire more Black people and then we are anti-racist. But they didn't understand it's about structure, systems, processes, and all the barriers that need to be removed. Creating a staff network, or entry level scheme isn't going to work alone if you want to be truly anti-racist. This work needs to be done at the highest level, looking at governance structures, senior management roles...

There was an overall consensus that 'the proof will be in the pudding', and a number of interviewees made comments such as: 'I hope to see radical change to slates and senior leadership teams going forward'; 'it cannot be tinkering... the structures need dismantling and restructuring'; and 'the industry needs completely different values, language and collective action'.

### **Do Black and Brown stories matter, or is 'lived experience' a buzz word?**

The majority of Producers and Directors of colour I spoke to, even very successful ones, said they had struggled to get projects greenlit by the big commissioners (or bigger production companies) when those projects were telling authentic stories about people of colour, or were based on their own lived experience.

Many had been approached by big production companies to work on projects about a non-White community, or with a person of colour in the lead, that had already been developed by an all-White team. Many commented that when White people from socio-economically privileged backgrounds are selecting the stories they think are interesting about communities of colour without having any lived experience, then even if they are doing so with good intentions it's hard to escape tropes and cliches about those communities.

When recounting experiences of meetings with commissioners or heads of bigger production companies, many highlighted the lack of **lived experience** or **cultural competence**. Several interviewees used the same phrase: 'they just don't get it'. One said that this group are 'very sensitive and few would hold their hands up and say we are riddled with unconscious bias'.

Several interviewees from different ethnicities and backgrounds noted that it was hard to get commissions for projects that told normal stories of people of colour, or every day shows or films which represented Black, Asian, or Middle Eastern characters in a non-stereotypical way. Some noted a slight shift since BLM with a few more 'Rom-coms' being worked on, but generally they were still concerned that the stories were perpetuating stereotypes and racist tropes. I will explore this further in the final section.

Many reported – some in passing, as if this was completely normal – that several shows have all-White writing teams even though the main character is a person of colour, or the show tackles the experience of a marginalised group. It was striking to me as an outsider

that it isn't recognised and accepted as standard good practice to co-produce or work with people with lived experience when telling their stories.

### **Are young Black and Brown Writers being exploited?**

One experienced Writer spoke of trying to work on a new TV series that was telling the story of people from their own racial background and was told they didn't have enough experience. They subsequently discovered that all the Writers chosen to work on the project were White and commented that lived experience was not valued, let alone sought out. Despite not being hired for 'not having enough experience', they still took a meeting with the Producer and felt a duty to their under-represented community to raise some of the racist pitfalls it looked like the team could fall into. The Writer found the meeting very problematic and felt as though they hadn't been heard and that the issues they raised weren't seen as important. After that tense meeting, the Producer hired another more junior Writer from that community to act as a cultural consultant rather than as a genuine part of the writing team. The Writer was sceptical as to whether this would shape the whole development process to make the show authentic. The project development continued, hiring only White lead Writers, and was eventually greenlit to series by a broadcaster. Once greenlit, in trying to find more Writers for the series, and interviewing Writers who shared the same heritage as the show's protagonist, it became a concern to members of that community that the scripts were racist and perpetuating stereotypes. The story went viral on social media both in the UK and among the international diasporic community. As a result, the show was halted, and after years in development it still hasn't been aired. The interviewee commented: 'Wouldn't it have been cheaper and easier to listen [to me] or hire me in the first place?' After these hard conversations about racism, the Writer has since been blacklisted from working with that broadcaster.

This was one of many accounts of junior Writers being deployed in an attempt to make a project culturally sensitive. This has become more common practice since BLM and in some ways is a welcomed shift, but as they are rarely a lead Writer and often in a majority White Writers' Room many interviewees believe this is tokenistic and still not enough. They flagged the challenge of being a younger Writer early on in their career trying to make an impression and build relationships, while being the lone person responsible for challenging a room of seniors. It was observed that some keep quiet or don't push points – while some do, and then really struggle to be heard or affect editorial changes. A few interviewees noted that when films and programmes land badly with the community in question, it can be more damaging for the junior Writers from that community than anyone else on the project. Either it is reasoned that they 'should have known better' or they are seen as not being in touch with the community. The effect can taint both their career and also their self-worth. One interviewee noted that even when listened to, many of these junior Writers are not being paid or credited adequately for the fact they are 'giving authenticity' to a script and project.

One Director recounted an experience on set where she and an actor – both the only people on set of the same race as the actor's character – had jointly noticed a racist line in the script and tried to have it changed. Not only was there pushback from the Producer and the Writer, but then a junior Writer, also belonging to their race, was called in and 'discharged' to persuade them the line and character were not racist, which the Director felt put them in compromising position. With experience in the USA, the Director tried to

seek advice from the Directors Guild of America, with whom they'd had great previous experiences discussing racism – the Guild was perplexed by this practice and shared the Director's concerns. When the Director tried to speak to the Producers again explaining this it prompted a very hard-line defensive response – the Producer even went to their agent to 'raise concerns about how troublesome they were being'.

Many felt that the use of 'cultural consultants' – typically hiring junior Writers who aren't listened to – is a way for productions 'to cover their backs' rather than receive genuine input to ensure the project is really representative. As one interviewee put it,

There needs to be proper co-creation and co-design from the beginning of a project.

A few interviewees raised a similar phenomenon, especially in factual work, of keeping an 'over-qualified person of colour' stuck in the role of Assistant Producer to effectively act as a 'community translator'. As with Writers of colour, there were accounts of these professionals having little voice. One interviewee said,

By proxy it's the same thing – White people telling our stories.

A few interviewees raised the fact that it's common practice to swap or change the race of characters in scripts without changing cultural context. One interviewee explained that successful swapping either relies on the Directors or people with editorial control being culturally adept, or on interventions from actors or off-screen talent who belong to the communities in question (which puts them under a lot of pressure and tends to involve significant extra work). If handled unsuccessfully, such swapping results in characters which do not resonate with the cultures being depicted or can result in the reality of racism never really being shown on screen.

A large proportion of interviewees from all different ethnicities raised a specific common 'excuse' often given for the lack of representation on set – namely, that there are no qualified Black, Asian or other minority ethnic talent who could fill these roles. Several interviewees took vociferous issue with this, explaining there are in fact many underused but experienced Writers, Directors, Producers, Researchers, Editors, Make-up Artists, Wardrobe Crew and others in a wide variety of industry roles. Some community organisations and individuals have started to respond to this disparity by creating lists of talent – the Blacklist being one of the most prominent examples.

Many interviewees felt strongly that people of colour should be given the agency to write and tell their own stories, and if a person who does not have that lived experience is involved in the development, they should defer to the judgement of those who do. Notably, some who held this view still felt nervous about advocating for such an approach in case it deterred gatekeepers, currently predominately White, from writing Black and Brown characters.

## Is intersectionality understood?

Some of this experience correlates with accounts given and pieces written by other underrepresented groups, such as women, disabled people, people from 'religious minorities' and people from working class backgrounds. The fact that discrimination can sometimes be operating across multiple vectors of identity, often simultaneously, caused some interviewees a disquieting level of confusion in interpreting their own experiences of racism: one interviewee, for example, questioned whether it was the fact she was a woman or a woman of colour that had made her experience so tough. Many of the interviewees I spoke with had intersectional identities, which presented 'multiple barriers'. It was notable that in particular Black women and Black and Brown people from working class backgrounds disproportionality described the experiences outlined above'.

An overwhelming number of interviewees acknowledged that there was a '**limited understanding of intersectionality**'. Intersectional analyses recognise that people do not always belong to a single protected characteristic, have multiple identities, and may face multiple barriers. For example, Black women experience dual marginalisation, while Black female-identifying immigrants experience a triple marginalisation. This highly influential concept was introduced by Black feminist, lawyer and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who observed that mainstream feminism had become dominated by and catered mostly to the experiences of White women, while traditional civil rights groups privileged the leadership and experiences of Black or other men of colour. How multiple identities intersect or experiences of multiple 'barriers' interact is not only little displayed on screen but also comparatively little unpacked in work and data on the workforce. The corresponding sense of erasure was described by one interviewee as follows: 'It's like people don't understand that we can be both Black and a women, queer or non-binary, working class, and an immigrant.'

## What should I take away from this section?

- Hiring practices and the use of references should not reinforce existing inequity with people in positions of power hiring and funding only those in their own image, or by arranging succession to friends to maintain systems of power.
- The relationship-based structures should not force people into 'good' or quiet behaviour when it comes to speaking up about racism in order for them to feel able to work and progress.
- Institutions must strive to become more accessible and transparent to people of colour but also to those working to dismantle anti-racism in the industry. Meaningful and sustainable investment in their work must happen, while avoiding performative 'quick wins'.
- The industry's common practice of telling other people's lived experience without them is not good practice, nor is it common in other industries. When deciding what should get commissioned or developed, it's important to be aware of blind spots and bias. Without lived experience, it is hard to be free of racist tropes.
- It is racist to ignore or overpower a person of colour's lived experience just because they are more junior and less represented.
- You need to work hard to overcome your blind spots, allowing people with lived experience the freedom and funding to tell their stories and bring you and others on this journey.

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# **Section 2: How Do Individuals Comment on - Let Alone Overcome - Structural Racism?**

## Are people of colour only allowed to progress on diversity schemes?

Many highlighted that the way people of colour are expected to progress is through 'diversity schemes' and initiatives. The majority of interviewees had at one point been a participant in a diversity scheme or been commissioned through a diversity drive. The emotional and facial response to just hearing the word 'scheme' was notable. Several had strong negative reactions, dismissing schemes as 'performative', 'tokenistic', 'non impactful', 'embarrassing and humiliating', 'a photo opportunity' and 'a box ticking exercise'. One interviewee said she had been on seven schemes during her time in her workplace and is still in an administrative role. However, some interviewees, often those working in institutions, disagreed and said that systemic change is incremental, so dismissing schemes was unhelpful.

Several noted that if the scheme didn't involve a **credit**, or meaningful paid work either during or guaranteed at the end of the scheme, they were not interested. Others noted the damage that can be caused when there isn't paid work guaranteed at the end of the scheme, as people uproot their lives to take part and can be left worse off than when they enrolled.

Some interviewees noted the positive – though often indirect – impacts that involvement in a scheme had had on their career. A few more experienced interviewees, often at mid-level, offered some interesting perspectives:

I learnt little from the scheme itself in terms of technical skills, work or development – if anything I was too experienced for training. However, I did gain from a network of other PoC/WoC having the same challenging experiences and we shared tips to navigate racism and how to persevere emotionally. Having that network of peers was invaluable, and I rely on that network years after. Before then I was very lonely and usually the only PoC where I worked.

And:

I was approached for a scheme supporting the progression of under-represented groups in the industry. They recognised that I should have progressed further based on the huge amount of experience and credits I had. This in itself was a pivotal moment for me. I had started to doubt myself and my ability when I saw less qualified people progressing and getting opportunities, which I knew I could do well. While on the scheme, I didn't learn much technically; they were essentially championing or endorsing me. Being associated with them gave me a glow and profile amongst colleagues. White men who had worked with for years at [specific broadcaster] and always been dismissive of me and very much in a club, suddenly had to recognise

me as a talent because this organisation had. It gave me more weight in my negotiations, and while I still don't think they wanted to include me and give me opportunities it looked worse on them if they didn't. In a way that's sad it took the scheme for people to be less racist.

Having a safe space to talk about career development and get advice was valued. This has been evolving naturally within communities, with some of the most effective examples being in schemes led by individuals of colour who have a genuine vocation to make the schemes work. However, it was noted that some of the mentoring offered in schemes was a bit light touch, and that it was hard to get senior people to engage meaningfully. Some mentioned they were looking for 'sponsorship' and long-term support from senior people rather than mentoring. It was noted that this more in-depth kind of support happens quite naturally between people of colour, and among other marginalised groups, but that without representative staffing at senior levels there are limits to what can be done.

As schemes were such a contentious issue, I commissioned Dr Clive Nwonka and Prof. Sarita Malik to map and evaluate the landscape of schemes in film and TV in the UK. They focused on macro level anti-racist interventions as they have evolved over the last 20 years. They define "macro" as referring to "large scale diversity initiatives specifically aimed at increasing the numbers of under-represented groups within the sector." (Nwonka and Malik, *Racial Diversity Initiatives in UK Film & TV*.)

### **Is progression for people of colour really different to White colleagues?**

The specific challenges of progression came up in the majority of interviews.

One interviewee remarked that senior people are often so happy with the performance of someone at mid-junior level that for business reasons they want them to stay in that job and continue doing it well. This disregards the obligations they might owe the mid-junior worker in terms of professional development and career progression.

Others spoke of how they were '**stuck in Assistant Director or Assistant Producer roles**'. This was common for those in film and TV alike. While many recognised the value of such roles in progressing their careers, several interesting comments were made:

Essentially, even though I am Director with several credits, I keep on being asked to do an AD role. In essence, I either have very little power and act as a sense-check, or direct the job but someone else gets the main credit. Of course, part of this is normal progression in the industry, but I really don't think other White Directors are getting asked to be ADs so much after they have proved themselves as able to be Directors.

Many Directors and Producers I interviewed spoke about reporting to White Directors or Producers who were less qualified than them. Interestingly, a lot of these examples

came from Black women. A few interviewees spoke of working on set for films and shows that had very diverse cast and crew, but in reality the executive leadership team were all White, and the diversity and lived experience was with the assistants, 'associates', or in Hair and Beauty. The lack of senior diversity on sets comes with challenges which I will explore later.

Several women of colour gave examples of applying unsuccessfully for jobs as Directors. When asking for feedback, the women were told they were 'too inexperienced to lead this project' and advised they needed to do more AD work to gain the necessary experience. However, many had already got credits as Directors. Some were even advised to do some shadowing or work experience despite already being at mid-level in their career. It is worth noting that this recommendation would be unusual in other industries, where work experience is commonly reserved for entry level talent. Those who took this advice said they ended up shadowing or working with White Directors who had less experience than them, and during the project felt confident they could have done the role and were confused as to why they were still perceived as inexperienced. This led to lots of self-doubt. One interviewee described the acute mental health impacts this had – a theme explored in the next section. After years of looking for other reasons for her lack of progression, it became clear to her it was because of her race.

Two separate Black female interviewees recounted times they were approached by junior 'up and coming' White Directors or Producers, who had identified the interviewees as people they admired, with lots of experience, and asked them for advice on their first feature film or own big project. The junior colleagues didn't realise how troubling this approach was for the more experienced talent, as, at that time and still to this day, they themselves have never been trusted with or commissioned to lead their own feature length projects. Both still offered to help, and during conversations the more junior White colleagues reflected on the disparity in their respective levels of experience and how much they were being trusted.

One striking example involved a Black female interviewee who discussed being hired as a Producer by a reputable production company to 'sort out a show' after predecessors had failed to do so and the project was running severely behind. She signed a contract to be a Producer, and then worked on the project for several months. She was then miscredited and relegated to a vague 'additional casting' job title that she said not only wasn't a 'legitimate or recognised credit' but was completely different to what was agreed in the contract. She didn't find out she had been demoted until the credits rolled at the premiere – an event at which the introductory speakers had specifically talked about the importance of Black women in the industry. The emotional labour involved in confronting this situation badly impacted the long-standing professional relationships involved and subsequently led to her choice not to return to TV.

Several interviewees spoke of reporting people for on-set racism, sexism and bullying who are still doing well in the industry. One mentioned a bully being promoted and given an enhanced credit on the project they were both working on, whilst one of his victims was fired 'with no clear reason' after complaining about the racism and sexism they had experienced on set.

One female Director hired as the lead Director on a big budget feature film, found herself being undermined throughout the shoot by the White male Assistant Director, who worked closely with the White male Producer. She found it increasingly difficult to get her voice –

and directions – heard, and for them to trust her creative vision. Several other people on set noticed this and commented this was ‘unusual’, remarking on the racism and sexism at play. She observed how one stunt coordinator was ‘loved by many of the sexist White men on set’, so she described herself as eventually having to ‘speak through him’, using him to help get the other men on board with her ideas. She noted this took place after the whole set had completed a course on ‘bullying and bias’.

### **Why do people of colour have to avoid UK institutions or leave the UK altogether to progress?**

The phenomenon of Black and Asian British actors **moving to the USA** to find success after failing to get strong opportunities in the UK is a well-known one. Many interviewees in off-screen roles similarly recognised ‘hitting a ceiling’ with what they were able to do in the UK. In America, they were trusted with much more opportunity and were able to return to the UK and acquire senior positions, which they were sure they wouldn’t have been able to access if they had stayed.

A large proportion of the interviewees who stayed in the UK and had ‘only ever wanted to work in film and TV’ felt they had to work outside of the industry to progress. Several interviewees had worked in the wider media industry, for example making adverts, online content, or music videos. They regarded these **less traditional routes into the industry** as essential to working and getting paid. Many recognised that UK theatre was using innovative methods to engage a more diverse workforce and audience. Some interviewees worked what they called ‘irrelevant’ jobs for years while making films ‘on the side’, before being recognised by the industry. It’s worth noting that many of the interviewees who shared this experience were from working class backgrounds and under the age of 40. Some suggested that historically there used to be more opportunities to work on set in junior roles and get paid.

One interviewee explained the need to diversify within the industry.

Even if a BAME led production company wants to make films, the likelihood of getting funded and greenlit regularly forces them to make television and even adverts to sustain. Interestingly, after COVID, big production companies who were so trusted and supported are now similarly having to diversify. I hope this doesn’t make it harder for BAME-led production companies.

Several Producers of colour mentioned wanting to have a **diverse portfolio of funders** to overcome some of the challenges in getting their projects greenlit by the big British institutions. They cited financiers, sales companies and, in some cases, distributors as being less problematic and more trusting of them to run their projects with autonomy. They also spoke of the importance of building networks with these organisations internationally and seeking funding opportunities outside the UK in order to be able to tell stories of non-White British communities.

As outlined in the previous section, while many of the interviewees were critical of **diversity schemes**, many reluctantly took part, even if they were not acquiring new skills or felt overqualified, because they were getting some sort of institutional recognition.

Several interviewees spoke of a radio silence or their career stalling after a big achievement, at the very point they expected it to take off. Notably, a few of these interviewees had experienced tough conversations on racism in their last project.

### **Do victims stay silent and perpetrators get rewarded?**

Many interviewees said there is simply nowhere to go when racist things happen. The majority feared being branded as ‘troublemakers’, as opposed to being recognised as victims, or people trying to make the work or workplace better. Some recounted being scolded for raising racism or underrepresentation in the workplace.

One interviewee said they were not necessarily trying to ‘cancel people [who are] doing racist things’, but wanted to find a way to challenge and change their behaviour, rather than witnessing those people continue to be celebrated and promoted. Similar statements were made by many interviewees. One or two felt that racist people should be fired.

Most interviewees said they do not raise every racist incident or microaggression they see. Many just want to get on with their job and going through the process of educating people is extra work. One interviewee said she tries to close her eyes to it and just push through.

Several interviewees recounted reporting a clear incident of racism – often clear racist abuse or profiling – but noted that in most cases nothing had been done in response. One interviewee was told it must have been a ‘funny misunderstanding’. Others experienced similar responses such as: ‘they probably didn’t mean it’, ‘casual racism’, and ‘no, I don’t think that happens anymore’.

A number of interviewees recounted times when they tried to raise issues of race or racism only to have the conversation turn into arguments or heated rows, describing the person they went to as quick to become ‘**defensive**’ and ‘on edge’. Many of these instances resulted in huge personal costs to the complainant, including damage to their relationship with the person they spoke to, and subsequently to their careers and mental health.

One Director highlighted how, when trying to advocate for a more junior woman of colour about the bullying she had experienced at the hands of two senior White men on set, there was huge pushback from the Executive Producers. The Director then tried to seek support from lawyers and Directors UK. The Producers proceeded to speak to her agent to ‘raise concerns about how troublesome [the Director] was being’. The junior woman then left the production and one of the perpetrators was promoted. Since then, the Director has had meetings with another production company about a new project, which they felt went really well. In discussing previous projects, the Producers mentioned they knew people the Director had worked with before. The new project went dead after the interview. As all the conversations had been going so well previously, the Director suspected they called their friends for references, heard the Director was ‘a nightmare’, and this was the reason why the relationship stalled.

One interviewee spoke of being in a public-facing role and receiving racist abuse and bullying. When he raised this with very senior management, seeking support, he was told to 'man up'. He mentioned other colleagues who tried to support him but were at a loss as to how to do so without any policies in place, or a culture informed by a clear understanding of what was acceptable and what was not.

Several interviewees commented on how the major institutions and most influential people in the UK industry are 'overly fragile' when speaking about racism: 'They are too fearful of being branded racist' and want to avoid a meaningful conversation altogether. Some said they have found a greater level of comfort among stakeholders when talking about the need to improve representation or 'creative diversity' for all marginalised groups, rather than speaking about racism in the industry specifically.

The following comment reflects the sentiments of several interviewees:

Having a representative and inclusive industry is where we need to get to. Of course, we need to get more people of colour in the institutions, especially in senior roles with editorial control. But we also need to think about the experience of those people when they are in the industry and make sure they don't face so much racism that they leave.

Those interviewees specifically highlighted the number of people of colour who *do* leave the industry altogether. One interviewee joked that it's a 'hostile environment'. However, there is no data or record of how many people have left the industry as a result of racism.

### **Who is accountable? Are institutions marking their own homework?**

Overwhelmingly, interviewees noted the lack of accountability in tackling racism and discrimination in the industry. A commonly used phrase was that the big institutions are 'marking their own homework'. Many claimed a lot of diversity and inclusion work is performative, designed to minimise PR risk and 'respond' to complaints, with institutions doing what they think they need to rather than what's effective. A large proportion of interviewees questioned the effectiveness of the diversity interventions made in the industry. This is explored in the research by Dr Nwonka and Prof. Malik on racial diversity initiatives.

Several interviewees noted there was no meaningful body holding the institutions to account about their lack of progress. Views were mixed on whether Ofcom should play that role. Some mentioned that they lack the legal powers to be able to hold people to account with consequence. Others said that Ofcom approaches creative diversity data broadly and didn't seem to want actively to address racism in the industry.

Several interviewees asked: 'If I experience or witness racism, where do I go and how do I report it?' Many noted the challenge of reporting racism anonymously if you are one of the few people of colour on a production or in a company.

In December 2020, Marcus Ryder MBE was commissioned by Bectu to write 'Race to be Heard' – a report which discussed the call for an independent racism reporting body in broadcasting. The proposed body would offer a place that people in the industry can go to (anonymously if needed) and would be able to support and advise people who have experienced racism.

### **Should the industry be concerned about manipulation of targets?**

Some interviewees also suggested that the newer diversity targets recently specified by several key institutions are being manipulated, and that people often treat improving diversity as a tick-box exercise, rather than meaningfully engaging with the reasons for underrepresentation and trying to make sure the industry is truly inclusive. A few interviewees felt that people were indiscriminately and desperately trying to find 'anyone Black or Brown to be on set'. Several interviewees questioned *who* was on set:

Having a Black intern or junior freelancer for a few weeks to meet a target isn't fixing the problem, especially if most heads of departments and senior leadership are still White.

### **What's taking so long?**

Many interviewees made the overarching observation that they felt progress on tackling racism and under-representation in the industry was taking 'too long' and that this work has been going on without success for 'nearly 30 years'. One interviewee noted:

I came into the industry via a diversity scheme targeting new young talent interested in TV when I was at secondary school. They spoke about the issues we hear today and that was over 20 years ago! This is a sign of huge failure.

Some recognised that racism is a widespread societal issue and the lack of progress in the industry was connected to lack of progress more generally. In contrast, one interviewee questioned the lack of progress and representation in film and TV specifically, commenting 'the industry is full of intelligent people who fix problems at work at pace; why can't they get their head around racism?'

Several spoke of the open letters written in the wake of BLM addressing racism in the industry and calling for more immediate action. These were signed by thousands of industry figures. Many acknowledged this as a moment when people really seemed to recognise racism and take responsibility for change. However, several interviewees said they spotted signatories with whom they'd had racist experiences and doubted that the signing of this letter would result in a radical change of behaviour.

## Losing out on \$10 billion a year?

A few interviewees mentioned the study by McKinsey & Company, published in March 2021, which stated that :

Pervasive issues of systemic racial inequality are costing the entertainment industry roughly \$10 billion a year.' One interviewee said he had discussed this widely within his industry network of other Black and Brown people and they joked 'how racist do you have to be to lose billions of pounds?!

## What should I take away from this section?

- Many people of colour are funnelled into schemes, while their White counterparts are able to learn and grow through paid opportunities in the industry.
- For institutions who feel they need a scheme to redress systemic balances it's crucial that any programme learns from the failures and successes of past schemes, is evidence-based, publicly evaluated, and has the potential to have quantifiable impact on participants' career progression.
- The lack of accountability and structures to enforce progress is very notable and unlike most other areas of public life. (Incidentally, there is currently a APPG on Diversity in the Arts; it will be interesting to see if new accountability structures or the strengthening of Ofcom and DCMS powers come from this.)
- If an organisation does anti-racism work, does that work actually tackle racism? If a person experiences racism they need to be able to discuss it with colleagues and feel supported, and if they want to report this robustly to their employer it should be acted on. 'If people continue to be racist is there a presumption that they will be given suitable re-education or redeployed?' There is a fear of cancel culture often culminating in the idea that someone will be 'axed' if they get something wrong. But cancel culture goes two ways: victims of racism and prejudice are being silenced and ignored. If it's only happening one way this is problematic and indicates structural racism.
- When a lack of action is actually bad for business – as the recent McKinsey Report suggests – it again indicates a serious issue of structural racism.

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# **Section 3: The Impact of Unchecked Racism**

## Why is the impact of racism on mental health ignored?

Many interviewees spoke about the impact of racism on their mental health, acknowledging mental health breakdowns after a specific event or describing conditions such as anxiety and depression, which they attributed to struggling to navigate racism at work. Others spoke more generally about the need to 'take a break' from the industry, whether briefly or over a longer period, and potentially permanently.

Many spoke about the strain and emotion involved reliving their experience while interviewing. Some spoke about the mental strain of trying to overlook regular experiences of racism and microaggressions so they can continue to do their job. Many said they felt they were constantly being 'gaslit' as a person of colour trying to navigate the industry.

Some spoke of suffering from 'imposter syndrome', doubting their accomplishments and suffering a persistent internalised fear of being exposed as a 'fraud', despite external evidence of their competence and achievements. One interviewee described this well:

Even though I went to one of the best film schools and had an extensive track record, after so many experiences of being undervalued or gaslit I started to believe I wasn't good enough and when I was with other colleagues at [said institution] I started to lose confidence and found it hard to speak up in meetings even though I knew I had good ideas. I started to think maybe I just wasn't good enough to get those bigger jobs. Now I realise that I was struggling with mental health challenges, and most of this was as a result of racism and classism. There were hoops I was being made to jump through that my White colleagues were not. Now I recognise that the problem wasn't about my ability.

Many spoke of relying on their networks of other people of colour and people who have been marginalised because they understand the experience. As one interviewee put it: 'I don't want to always have to explain myself or very simple concepts to people who don't get it. It makes you mad.' They relied heavily on these networks for emotional, professional, and practical support, for references, and for opportunities.

Interviewees who either currently, or historically, have been in more senior positions within big institutions all described feelings of isolation, especially from other people of colour. One summarised the experience:

You get into these positions and are finally seen as being 'in the room'. You are working twice as hard to get recognised and have influence. You are having a huge number of battles behind closed doors – often on behalf of your community and other under-represented people. It's exhausting and triggering, and you are usually the only person of colour and struggling with lots of racist dynamics. Not only are you alienated

within the senior teams, but the hardest part is being questioned and called a 'sell out' by other people of colour coming up in the industry, saying you aren't making real change and helping other Black and Brown people. Those moments are often the hardest. It's so lonely.

## Are There Specific Obstacles For Black People?

Successful interviewees made a point of noting a **proximity to White decision makers** which made it easier for them to be heard and progress. Different factors were mentioned which they thought had helped them be 'accepted by the industry', such as having 'mixed heritage', 'light skin', a 'private education' or an 'Oxbridge degree'. A number of Indian or South Asian interviewees made this point, and two Asian interviewees also wanted to clarify how they felt it was harder for Black colleagues to succeed. Several Black interviewees correspondingly observed that they felt South Asian colleagues were getting notably more opportunities – even if these were still limited. A few Black interviewees noted the absence of East and Southeast Asian leaders and those from other minority ethnic communities in senior positions. One mixed race Producer who had personally navigated racism, especially within institutions, felt it was more important to amplify and advocate for 'mono racial' [or Black] peers as their experiences were harder.

Several interviewees acknowledged the particular challenges for people of colour from working class backgrounds and those living outside of London. They noted that these groups were almost entirely missing from the industry and if they were working, faced serious barriers. Many noted that representation of disabled people in the industry was also woeful, and there was little discussion about intersectionality between race and disability, for example being a dyslexic or autistic person of colour.

## Is co-producing with White established talent the only way for people of colour to get work made?

Sponsorship and allyship were often mentioned in these interviews. Some spoke about **co-producing work with White allies** – who find it easier to gain trust and get funded – in order to 'tell our stories'. This was noted as becoming more common in some recent films, not just among Writers, Directors, Producers but also 'Associate' Casting Agents.

In cases where this has resulted in authentic portrayals of people of colour on screen, there was a consensus that it puts a lot of pressure on junior people of colour to be very vocal in advocating for authenticity. One interviewee described themselves as a 'nuisance fighter' working hard and being vocal to stop people doing racist, immoral, or lazy things. They said this was crucial to avoid 'digital blackface' – the phenomenon of non-Black people using the images and voices of Black individuals to explain emotions or experience, which can result in stereotypes and the dehumanisation of Black people.

Many interviewees were also clear that this relies on more senior White people on set: 'stepping out of the way', 'genuinely listening', 'doing the right thing', 'going on a journey' and 'understanding their blind spots'. For some more junior people of colour this has been

an exhausting process, but they were proud of the outcome. One interviewee said:

These established people are not only getting genuine access to our stories, our communities but also relating to actors with lived experience, through us. We give them access. They have blind spots stopping them from seeing layers to a story and Black or Brown character – but also actors and informants open up to us in a deep and vulnerable way which is very different to how they work with White colleagues. We have a really important role as the person of colour to be brave and bold in making sure these stories are told properly and these experiences are honoured. We are almost acting as a buffer to ensure the actors and audiences don't have to be affected by bias and it's not easy, but the art should be protected at all costs.

They went on to talk about self-protection: 'And we all know that if something goes wrong it will be us, the people of colour on the project, who the finger is pointed at – but if it goes right our White senior colleagues will get the praise.'

Many interviewees recounted examples where this allyship and co-production has allowed projects to gain bigger budgets from the big institutions. Some noted that this means they are having to split profits for projects, and while at first this may be a route many use to build capacity, if it's the only route through which BAME-led production companies are able to access funding they are losing out significantly. A few interviewees questioned this, with one saying:

How come a White Director can get £5m funding for a film about the Black British experience, but another Black Writer/Director struggled to secure half of that funding to direct a film when it's his own lived experience? But also, why did that same White Director only get half the budget for her film than previous films she did about White people?

Another interviewee questioned why longstanding institutions are celebrating the

funding of their most diverse film to date' when it happened so recently?

### **Why are 'community' efforts not properly listened to and invested in?**

There are a range of people of colour in the industry who have become active in advocating for creative diversity and anti-racism. The majority lead advocacy work and run schemes alongside their day jobs, and some end up dedicating their professional lives

to this work on a full-time basis. Several recognised they felt they had ‘no choice’ but to commit to changing the industry after facing barriers and racism themselves.

A number of interviewees recognised this ‘community-led’ work and organising as ‘important’, ‘crucial’ and ‘the future of fixing this problem’. One or two people working in institutions referred to them as ‘activists’, which on reflection I found a telling inaccuracy.

There was a distinction made between two different approaches: firstly, experts tackling racism and driving creative diversity in the industry using evidence-based interventions to make systems change, and secondly individuals of colour doing short-term projects with an institution to support other more junior talent. Many interviewees flagged the need for ambitious structural solutions. One interviewee asked: ‘What do we want in 10 years? What do we want to access? Let’s be ambitious and look at radically changing systems.’

The majority of interviewees who were doing this structural work – even if heavily relied-on by big institutions and recognised as having long track records of good outcomes and strong projects – still struggled to secure core funding. They also spoke about a lack of space to make their work sustainable and allow it to grow in order to tackle underrepresentation and racism in a meaningful way. One interviewee who had worked with big corporate entities re-mortgaged his house to keep his work going. Many noted that institutions wanted them for quick fixes, names of talent, and ‘conversations’, but less so for ideas around big structural changes and well-funded long-standing programmes and policies. Another said:

I want to be listened to and respected for the work I do – not force-fed by organisations not getting right what I should be doing. [Industry leaders] need to stop pretending they know the answer: they don’t. Stop trying to get a random Black person in to tinker [with] what they think already works. Listen, move out the way and let someone with expertise come in and make ambitious change.

One interviewee questioned why robust efforts hadn’t been made to source and hire international talent with proven track records to make radical change in the UK, when it should be a core business imperative. An interviewee with a history of successfully leading systems change asked, ‘When will I be given an executive job in the industry?’ Many noted that when institutions *do* hire people to lead work on diversity or change, they are rarely given senior roles across the whole business. One interviewee commented:

Senior inclusion roles focused exclusively on HR is a problem – what about core business, creative roles, commissioning, and the selling of that content? Those are the areas that need to change. You cannot claim to be anti-racist by hiring a Black person to make Black work, but then when it goes terrestrial fear to sell it to China or Japan because you fear they don’t like Black people – that is pure racism!

Many noted that the focus on creative diversity and under-representation was the main priority and work specifically on unpicking racism was lacking, or only recently emerging in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. This is addressed in Dr Nwonka and Prof. Malik's accompanying research.

Many of the current 'Diversity and Inclusion' leads in big institutions have themselves worked in the industry as 'makers' and changed direction to improve creative diversity. Several interviewees noted the relatively small budgets for these departments, albeit with some recent new injections of funding. They also were concerned that diversity and inclusion agendas were not meaningfully championed or understood by all senior and mid-level leaders.

A few interviewees were critical of how creative diversity had apparently become 'its own industry', with people going from 'institution to institution', doing the same work and not necessarily looking at 'radical alternatives' because they are trying to 'stay in a job and maintain relationships'. A few accomplished Black and Brown interviewees who work as content creators said these individuals and the institutions were hard to reach and rarely got back to emails and requests.

Among interviewees working on anti-racism outside of institutions but alongside them, there was a perception that these broadcasters were competing and wouldn't always share best practice. As one interviewee put it: 'Until these big orgs work together with true commitment there will be no change.' However, one D&I exec in a big broadcaster noted that before being in her role she thought all the institutions were in silos, but was surprised at how collaborative it actually is, with EDI leads working together to get this right and meeting regularly through the Creative Diversity Network (CDN) process and Ofcom meetings.

### **Is racism behind the screen resulting in racism on screen and in society?**

Many of the interviewees decided to get into the industry in order to make stories about 'people like them'. Many recognised the power of 'being seen' on TV and in a film, especially when you are struggling with marginalisation and racism.

Many interviewees raised concerns about racist portrayals of minority ethnic communities in the UK. A number of South Asian and Arab interviewees noted the racist portrayals of their communities. Some comments included: 'Unless you are making a story about honour killings or terrorism good luck getting funding to make a story', and 'I would prefer to not see one Hijab-wearing Asian woman on screen than the damaging portrayals we have at the moment.'

Many noted the lack of East and Southeast Asian characters and stories, and a number of Southeast Asian female interviewees took issue with the dangerous 'oversexualisation of Asian women on screen', commenting how this was normalising hate crime and dangerous behaviour towards Asian women. Interviewees were concerned that portrayals of these communities are often extremely stereotypical, with one asking:

When will we see a Chinese character not in a Chinese takeaway?

Some of the Black interviewees noted that in the last year there had been some encouraging new portrayals and shows, where Black Directors and Writers were able to make important work. The critical acclaim for *I May Destroy You* and *Small Axe* suggested an overwhelming appetite for these stories, but also showed that a broader audience benefited from and enjoyed them. Several interviewees noted that more Black Writers and Producers need to be given such opportunities, with space to grow and develop and eventually make masterpieces.

One Black female interviewee said:

I don't get why White people are not more upset that they have been lied to and not truly heard our stories they are currently missing out on. We have still grown up enjoying their stories. I am a Black woman and I love *Sex and the City*. I am *Miranda*. A UK version of *Girlfriends* won't dismantle or upheave whiteness in the UK. It's limiting your entertainment and your ability to relate to others. People should be more angry about that.

However, they also wondered why some of the stories in recent shows were only now being told for the first time. Either way, they hoped this new direction would continue.

Several Black interviewees felt pressure during development from Commissioners, or Commissioning Execs, to tell and pitch stories in a certain way. They felt they were still not able to tell stories of normal Black British people free from stereotypes such as 'gangs', and that it was harder to have a Black character without a 'social problem'. If these factors were missing, they were told 'this character isn't developed enough'. This correlates with the criticism made in Kolton Lee's open letter, *Why I No Longer Want to Speak About Race* (2018). One interviewee mentioned being asked why the character in the story they were pitching wasn't 'suffering hardship'. While they recognised that racism is systemic, and unfortunately central to the Black experience, they also said there is joy. When asked how they will know anti-racist efforts are working, they replied: 'When I see several shows on each channel about Black people that are not about Windrush, slavery or gangs.'

Overall, interviewees from all ethnicities stressed the concern about the damaging impact of racist portrayals. One interviewee said: 'If you are going to have a racist portrayal, or racist comment on screen, you need to contextualise it so it's clear to the audience that it is racist, or that a character is being racist. Otherwise, you are normalising racism and racial stereotypes to a mass audience which is hugely damaging.'

## What should I take away from this section?

- Without accountability and action on racism in the industry, the onus and strain is put on people of colour and their mental health. It is mentally exhausting to raise challenges delicately, find daily methods to counteract racism, and to be heard on a systemic or personal level – especially when this occurs outside of an already demanding and competitive day job with colleagues who don't share this experience.
- There is a clear issue with anti-blackness in the industry, and a sore underrepresentation of other groups such as East and Southeast Asians, Arabs and East Africans. Behind-the-screen bias is contributing to racist portrayals on-screen, and the work done by people of colour to try and stop this happening often goes unnoticed and unrecognised. There are committed people working tirelessly to try and help dismantle racism and bias in the industry. Space and proper investment need to be given to these leaders to help make structural change.

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# Conclusion

Racism is deeply entrenched in society and hard to escape. It should be widely accepted that everyone will have racial and social biases. Rather than claim defensively to 'not be racist' we should be working to honestly understand and dismantle racist structures and behaviours. As one interviewee observed:

Quickly getting a few new Black and Brown people into your organisation or on projects is not being an anti-racist organisation.

We should all be seeking to be actively anti-racist. In doing this work, it was clear to me that many people have not really recognised and internalised what racism looks like in the industry – both for individuals who experience it, and in the way existing structures enable it to continue.

From an outsider's perspective, the relationship-based structure of the UK film and TV industry described throughout this piece makes it particularly ripe for racism and bias.

While I do not claim to have conducted a huge and formal statistical piece of research, I have now heard a sizeable number of hard-hitting experiences which indicate racism of all kinds is rife in the UK film and TV industry. There remains work to be done before anti-racism commitments are effectually underpinned by meaningful action and change. Given the social influence of film and TV, this has damaging effects. If this industry addresses racism correctly, there is a precious opportunity to change perceptions around race and help dismantle racism.

Interviewees of all races and backgrounds mentioned and identified experiences of 'working with racists', but the majority chose not to reveal individuals. Similarly, a few interviewees recalled shocking comments but asked for these to be treated as 'off record' – a request which I have respected. Some interviewees admitted that while there was clear racism and bias on set they were nervous to go into too much detail as they didn't want to undermine the project they'd worked so hard to get right. Despite being wary of the consequences of speaking out, many interviewees took the opportunity to speak freely about race in seeking to address the problem of structural issues. I do hope readers of this piece share this same attitude and rather than guessing who has informed the piece or what project or institution they are talking about, I hope they focus on the points made and that readers are inspired to examine their own practice and workplace.

A few interviewees noted that while they were being treated in a hostile way and differently from other colleagues, it was sometimes hard to know if this was happening because of their race, gender identity, sexuality, or working-class background. It is important to understand the intersectional issues at play and take an integrated approach to inequities. However, it is clear that racism remains a pressing issue and needs to be given its own adequate attention, consideration, and resource.

While many considered the informal, closely connected nature of the industry necessary and inevitable, I think it is important to establish informal hiring practices and use of references which do *not* reinforce existing inequity. People in positions of power have been hiring and funding those in their own image, and also passing their positions on to friends which maintain systems of power. It's also important that relationship-based

structures do not force people into 'good' or 'quiet' behaviour when it comes to speaking up about racism for fear that that speaking up will negatively impact their work and progress.

It's crucial that institutions strive to become more accessible and transparent to people of colour, and also to those working to dismantle anti-racism in the industry. Meaningful and sustainable investment in their work will aid this, as will avoiding performative 'quick wins' and short-term schemes.

I was struck by how normalised it is to exclude people of colour both from telling their own stories and from helping find meaningful solutions to anti-racism in the industry. In other industries, it is standard practice to make lived experience central to work.

As a policy maker, I was also astounded by the lack of (public) evaluation and monitoring of schemes. A space is needed for industry leaders to evaluate what is and isn't working, who is doing good work, and who needs to do more. Without clear, independent, industry-wide evaluation and accountability, it is extremely difficult to ensure *any* work is making real systemic changes, or to counteract the criticism that anti-racist efforts in this industry are largely performative.

This discussion met with some jaded responses – a sense that it had all been going on too long, with not enough action and responsibility for change taken. In an industry of storytellers and intelligent people, many 'gatekeepers' eloquently package their work on diversity, but I wasn't always confident they understood – or had truly heard – what anti-racism really was or looked like; this piece aims to illustrate the depth of the challenges.

To address this deficit, some humble, hard self-reflection on racism in the institutions is needed, alongside a subsequent rehaul of institutions and governance. This must range from big broadcasters and funders to medium-sized production companies and distribution companies, while also incorporating some sharp political and public interventions – with consequences – to ensure meaningful progress.

While there is concern about this work being 'all talk', there are ironically few safe spaces to discuss and report experiences of racism in the industry. When this does happen, it relies on brave people putting their mental health and careers on the line to challenge racist people and structures. This was recognised in Marcus Ryder's review for Bectu last year – where he proposed an independent TV racism reporting body. I second this proposal but think it should be expanded to support those working in film too. This will need industry-wide action and support. I hope the Charity works with Bectu and other supportive parties to make this happen, even advocating for primary legislation if needed. Victims need to be able to safely report instances of racism and its perpetrators – including those complicit in racist systems.

In the accompanying research by Dr Clive Nwonka and Prof. Sarita Malik, there are some really valuable recommendations for structural change in anti-racism. Their data and findings correlate with several of the themes found in this work: lack of accountability, the need for 'community-led' solutions, and lack of evaluation among others. They highlight the disconnect between quantitative research, for example data and reports on numbers such as Diamond, and qualitative work illustrating the reality of lived experience, some of which is captured in this report. It worries me that lived experience is being overlooked. Many interviewees had never before spoken publicly about their experience as they felt

there was too much at stake, and it was too damaging of their mental health. I have been mindful of how triggering it's been for many to share their experience. I hope reading this will make those who felt alone in their experience aware that others have shared it, and that collectively theirs is an important voice and lever for change. I wholeheartedly agree with the statement made by one interviewee that as it stands

Racism in this industry looks like fear. Fear of being challenged, of being corrected, or the perception of correction. It's [leaders] using power to slow things down.

### **What action should the Charity and industry be taking?**

I felt very conscious of putting 'another report' out there without action so while working with the Film and TV Charity, I have been encouraged to see a willingness to acknowledge historic shortcomings and take action. Firstly, they have ringfenced 30% of all financial support going forward for people of colour in the industry. Secondly, they have now made a financial commitment of £1m to support 'community-led' work to tackle anti-racism. This should allow more creativity and freedom to find systemic solutions with people of colour at the centre. This will turn into a permanent funding stream to tackle racism and discrimination in the industry. I hope this funding supports and strengthens the anti-racism movement within the industry. There are other, much larger, bodies that have greater power and funding – including public money. For real change to happen across all the big institutions in the UK, there will need to be radical changes to funding structures, commissioning structures, HR structures, but also governance and leadership structures. From top to bottom, the industry will need to be truly diverse. This cannot be done in silos or without people of colour, women, disabled people, working class people, LGBTQ+ people and people from across the country, and the global industry. These voices need to be given space, power, and autonomy to help drive change. Those who have failed to shift the needle on representation and racism need to have some hard internal and external conversations on how they are complicit, and how they will now commit to being anti-racist. The Charity is now investing money in anti-racism efforts, making funding available to community leaders keen to strengthen the coordination of industry leaders and execs in their commitment to anti-racism.

## Recommendations for the Film and TV Charity and the UK film and TV industry:

1. Make a clear commitment to anti-racism underpinned by meaningful and measurable actions – and assess staff and organisational performance in correlation with this. Ringfencing 30% of spend and outputs is meaningful and representative.
2. Ensure that the anti-racism agenda is not limited to HR departments, but that all teams including creative teams, governors and executive teams have ownership of this issue and clear action plans with proportionate ringfenced funding.
3. Be publicly accountable on all work on anti-racism and redressing wider inequality.
4. Be transparent and collaborative when working with researchers to evaluate any anti-racism work.
5. Work together with other industry partners to move the needle on racism and creative diversity in the industry.
6. Work together to establish a body to support people of colour to report any discrimination, as outlined in Marcus Ryder's review for Bectu last year.
7. Meaningfully listen to, and invests in, anti-racism projects and interventions designed and led by people of colour.
8. Centralise the lived experience of people of colour and other marginalised groups in all work – from decision making to Writers' Rooms.

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# **Annex: Worksheet for Anti-Racism in UK Film and TV**

**I wanted to close with a page of questions to help readers consider their own role in anti-racism in the industry. I hope this is shared widely and helps open-up conversations for readers to explore their own complicity in racism in the industry and to think about new behaviours and structures going forward.**

**Racism is a fact of the UK's film and TV industry, and everyone in the industry needs to be actively anti-racist. If you've read this report and want to check your own anti-racism practice then consider the questions below. Where do you feel you're making progress? Where do you know you could do better? How will you continue to grow? If you work with people who don't see racism as an issue in our industry then perhaps you can find a way to share one of these questions with them, too.**

1. Do you understand what racism is and what it looks like in your life and work?
2. Do you understand what it means to be actively anti-racist?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where you have seen someone treated differently because of their race? If so, what did they do about it? What did you do about it? Did you know who or where to report this to?
4. Do you have people of colour in your inner circle? How many? If you do not, how do you expand your networks and build trust? Would you feel comfortable giving someone a paid opportunity or to lead a project without anyone in your inner circle personally knowing that person well?
5. Have you ever been in a team or room of decision-makers and had no people of colour in that room? How many times?
6. In your current or most recent places of work, how many people were Black, Asian or belonged to another minority ethnic group? Did any have decision-making powers?

7. Do you have a protégé, or spend extra time investing in the career of someone more junior? Have you given them references? Helped them get more opportunities? Have you advocated on their behalf? Do you have regular contact? Are they the same race and social background as you? Have you ever supported a person of colour in this way?
8. Who is responsible for improving representation and diversity in the work you do and in the industry more broadly? Do you feel you have a role to play? Is there more you could be doing within the power you have?
9. Has any person of colour told you what they think is needed to improve representation, diversity, and ability to tackle racism where you work? If so, did you or others listen? Were these changes made?
10. If you are positioned to allocate funding or commission work, how much of your funding and commissions go to representing and supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and people? Is it representative of where you live and are based? (At least 42% for London, 42% in Birmingham, 15% in Leeds, 14% Nationally. NB: this is from the 2011 census and numbers will now be higher.)
11. Do you think the UK public want to hear stories that are new to them and go beyond the stories they've already heard? Do you think White people want to hear stories of other communities and races?
12. If someone has lived experience and you do not, do you defer to them on what that experience would look and feel like and make changes to your project in response to their experience?
13. Have you ever been in a situation where a person from a marginalised community raised concerns about how their community was being portrayed in a certain project? If so, did you listen and make changes?
14. How many times have you seen racist characters in film and TV and was this discussed overtly within the piece?

15. Do you understand the concept of intersectionality? When you tell stories of White characters, do you explore their personality, sexuality, likes and dislikes, interaction with their family and community, their abilities, their physicality, their politics, their faith, their desires? Do you do the same when you are presenting Black characters, Asian characters, and characters from other minority ethnic communities?
  
16. Do you feel there need to be 'different voices in a room?' How are these voices heard?
  
17. Have you ever watched a film or TV show that helped you to understand racism and changed your perceptions? Have you ever watched a show where you learnt something about a new community or race?