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Chapter 3: Feminism, intersectionality, and decolonization theories

“The price we have to be willing to pay is ourselves”: discussing illusions of inclusion in science centers and museums

Rokia Ballo, Subhadra Das, Emily Dawson, Vanessa Mignan, and Clémence Perronnet

Introduction

Science museums and science centers are far from welcoming places for many people. Built on violent colonial expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, museum funding, collections, and the very fabric of their buildings are enmeshed in socio-political histories steeped in racism and its intersections with sexism, ableism, homophobia, and class discrimination (amongst others). Their contemporary cousins, the science centers, are built on the same ideational foundations and echo many of these problems. In science museums and science centers the traumatic legacies of empire often sit alongside celebrations of people, ideas, and practices we find abhorrent today, such as the ‘science’ of eugenics. While such theories are widely denounced, they live on in these institutions, enshrined in statues of dead white men and the names of rooms, collections, and buildings. These histories live on too in the institutional whiteness and racism faced by staff and visitors alike (Das & Bradley, 2017; Das & Lowe, 2018; Dawson, 2019; Rasekoala, 2019). Our experiences of challenging the embedded racism and white supremacy steeped into the foundations, knowledges, and practices of such institutions is our focus in this chapter.

Fighting the good fight

We felt compelled to write this chapter in light of the growing popularity of decoloniality as a term in cultural institutions and academia. In our experience, this shift in language is taking place without the concomitant acknowledgment of institutional whiteness and racism or the changes in staff diversity, organizational structures, and systems of professionalism that decolonial approaches require. Instead, decolonial language is often used as a kind of “equity-washing.”

Meaningful inclusion is inherently disruptive and decolonization can even be a violent process (Fanon, 1963; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Developing Feminism,

intersectionality, decolonization decolonial approaches is the subject of much discussion, and rightly so. We build here on the ideas of Dr. Foluke Adebisi (2020) who talks about decolonization not only as a destination but as a constant way of being: fundamentally different from diversity work that often attempts to fit into the structures of neoliberal institutions that are driven by colonial logics. Decolonizing people's minds involves being able to imagine the death of the institutions we work for and the simultaneous survival of the world.

In the face of the equity-washing we, the authors, have experienced, we argue here that anti-racism, social justice, inclusion, and equity are not subjects of minority interest. Rather, these are the most salient problems in our societies, problems that ultimately require dissent and disruption in order to be addressed. And, as we explore here, embracing these concerns comes at considerable personal cost to the people who choose to do this work.

We write this chapter as three women of color and two white women, based in France and the UK, drawing on our cross-cultural expertise and experiences to interrogate the illusions of inclusion that haunt our work. We use the collective voice here and write collaboratively, but, as we note at various points below, differences of "race"/ethnicity, nation, and the particularities of context mean not all struggles are the same and, between us, we hold a range of experiences and insights. Inspired by the writings of bell hooks (1994), this chapter is based on a summer of conversations in 2020, extracts from which appear below with names as appropriate. As practitioners and researchers, we work with and for science museums, science centers, universities, and similar organizations that seek to mediate science and society relationships. Crucially, we are all working toward antiracist practices and social justice, and in this chapter we openly discuss the shape of what we describe as the "battlefield" of equity in science museums, science centers, and similar organizations.

In what follows we incorporate wide-ranging concepts from decolonial philosophy and the history of science, as well as ideas from critical race theory, Black studies, post-colonial studies, theories of affect, and research from science education, communication, and museum studies. We value these theoretical tools because they help us to explicitly detail practices such as institutional whiteness, to illustrate our experiences of racism with specificity, and to insist upon naming racism and the insidious nature of white supremacy as it undergirds the institutions we work with. Thus, building on the work of those who have come before us and in the spirit of our collective enterprise, we use this broad range of concepts to deconstruct ideas about the "battle" that people committed to anti-racism and social justice in science museums, science centers, and similar organizations are engaged in. We work with these concepts to interrogate ideas of professionalism and what it means to reach our personal and professional limits, and to share suggestions for success in the face of challenges that, at times, appear to be insurmountable. We conclude by tracing the implications of our conversations and by pointing toward our practical advice and expansive hopes for the future.

We write this in solidarity with people who find themselves in similar positions and to give voice to situations that we have in common but that are not commonly spoken about. We want you to know you are not alone and you are not the problem. We hear you, we see you, and we know the work you are doing is important. Our goal in this chapter is to make space for you to know that when you talk about racism, coming up against brick walls of institutional whiteness and other forms of marginalization in science, science museums, and science centers, you are not being

out of order or unprofessional. These are our experiences of working in spaces that were not made with us, or our goals, in mind. Where we have given examples we have been as explicit as we felt was safe for us. Writing this paper and doing this work makes us vulnerable in our professional sector. Enlightenment science co-opted the language of experience and removed our ability to speak to our own humanity. We speak here from our personal experience and emotions, and in this context our experiences and emotions are proof enough (Harris, 2018). We do not have all the answers, but these are our answers and we hope they are of use to you.

What is the shape of the battle?

A lot of us started working toward more inclusion in our institutions with a form of naïveté. We were convinced that this greater cause—making science more accessible to women, working-class people, and people from racialised minorities in our countries—would easily gain support from our colleagues and partners. Who is not interested in creating a more equitable world? We soon learned from experience that equality and inclusion, far from being rallying cries, are actually banners carried to a battlefield. If we are to have any chance of making a difference, we must know the lay of the land and the factions involved. We need to acknowledge there are people invested in maintaining the status quo, and who are unwilling to give up those interests without a fight. As Vanessa described, it is essential to acknowledge that it is a battle: “If you do not know it is going to be a battle, how can you prepare your weapons? How can you think strategically?” Indeed, on the institutional side, battle lines are drawn both tacitly and tactically. We have all come to know that knowledge of the battlefield and preparation are key.

The battle for inclusion is first and foremost shaped by national contexts. As Vanessa and Clémence testified, the French context makes it complicated to talk about “race.” In the public space, we come up against the notion of French Republican Universalism and the idea, as some put it, that “there is no race in France” (Dorlin, 2009; Guillaumin, 1981). Those who evoke the “non-problem of race” find themselves accused of being “obsessed by race” and as perpetuating racial discrimination. Three years ago, the word “race” was removed from the French constitution as it was seen as a threat to the equal treatment of citizens. In addition, there is an ongoing debate in the academic world about the place that social sciences should give to the analysis of racial inequalities (Fassin & Fassin, 2006; Sénac, 2015).

Intersectional research, which tackles the combined effects of gender, class, and ethnoracial inequalities (Bilge, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989), is in an uncomfortable position in the French academic field. It is accused of minimizing the effects of class in favor of other forms of domination, even though analyses of scientific publications show this is far from the case: in academic journals, analysis in terms of class is still largely predominant (Bernau, 2018; Hajjat, 2020).

This purposeful, political removal of the language of race and racism has concrete consequences for our research and practice: addressing racism is extremely difficult when you cannot name it without taking multiple precautions and running the risk of stigmatization (Perronnet, 2018). Being able to name acts of discrimination is a first step, but does not solve the problem. It can even lead to another dead end, a “let’s label it and just be done with it” attitude. In France, we have talked about “equality between men and women” and the “issue with women in science” for 30 years with no results (Blanchard et al., 2016; Collet, 2019). In the United Kingdom, academic and public discourses about race remain a niche subject. While it is not taboo, Emily, Rokia, and Subhadra have all experienced the inherent self-protection and racism of

the system, navigating within the confines of predominantly white academic institutions and paradigms (see, for example, UCL, 2014).

Institutional change does not just happen, and attempts to disturb the established order encounter resistance. This resistance is notably caused by the existing (im)balance of power in universities and science institutions. Museums, public science institutions and academia remain professional fields that are difficult for women and people of color to break into or reach high-ranking positions (Arts Council of England, 2018; Perronnet, 2019; Solanke, 2017). Senior members of staff tend to be older, white men. In organizational communication practices, both within and outside these institutions, in our experience, the views and opinions of those senior staff members are framed as aligning with the institution itself, rather than being seen as a single voice in a corporate body. The same does not apply when such individuals transgress well-established social norms: they are then publicly and often dramatically chastised. For example, Sir Tim Hunt was forced to resign from an honorary academic role at University College London following public condemnation of sexist remarks he made in a conference in 2015. By contrast, as women, women of color, and people who tackle exclusion and racism, we are well aware of our professional obligations to not bring our organizations into disrepute. Yet, there is also an unspoken understanding that our race critical research shows the institution to be disreputable by default.

This double standard about who is and is not seen to speak for the university—and when they are allowed to do so—puts huge pressure on those of us who do critical, reflexive work. For instance, when Subhadra talks about the history of eugenics at University College London, her work stands in stark contrast to the very public opinions of well-established and often highly respected scientists. When she was interviewed in a national newspaper for an article on this subject, a senior, well-established member of staff (who has been called out by his own students for having made ableist remarks) was given the first and last word. In the battlefield of science equity, well-established senior white academics hold the high ground (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Royal Society, 2018; Williams et al., 2019).

Questions about who holds institutional voice and power reveal another distressing pattern in our work on inclusion with science museums and centers: institutions only listen when they need a token or when it meets a certain agenda. They appropriate our work when it suits them—notably insofar as it checks a few “diversity” boxes in evaluation paperwork—but belittle, undermine or disregard it when it does not. That is, when it calls for a concrete, funded, and supported change. A few of us remember being gaslit by managers who have undermined our work but have taken credit for it at the same time. To protect ourselves and others we cannot describe these incidents here or in any other public venue. This dynamic causes an inflated sense of institutional vulnerability for people of color and those who do race critical research.

Scientific institutions, museums, and science centers are also places of specific struggles for people who point out the exclusionary dimensions of science. Indeed our work undermines a fundamental belief of those who work in scientific mediation: that science is good, neutral, and progressive. This representation is incompatible with discourses about how science institutions produce exclusion and discrimination. At an individual level, our approach boils down to telling people that they are wrong about the very nature of the cause they are dedicated to. At an institutional level, our approach highlights the role of museums and similar organizations in maintaining power relations and preserving privileges.

You are now the enemy. So, what is professional?

Questions of professionalism haunted our conversations of 2020. What were the parameters of professionalism for people committed to anti-racist practice and social justice in science museums and similar institutions when the original purpose of these places was to hold up and relay racist and colonialist theories? We turn here to discuss our experiences of the tensions that being “professional” created for us, with a focus on tokenism, double standards, and navigating institutional whiteness.

Our commitments to anti-racism and social justice were experienced both as extremely personal and as work that was ascribed to us, particularly those of us who are women of color. Through our practice, we came to personify institutional dreams (and nightmares) of inclusion and so-called “diversity” for the organizations we worked for and with. For us, then, any sense of distinction between the personal and the professional was rare. This kind of personification, as we discuss below, protects institutional whiteness and what Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001, p. XV) describe as the “business-as-usual forms of racism.” As such, we note a key double standard in how illusions of inclusion are enacted—it is through our presence and work that illusions of diversity, inclusion, anti-racist practice, and intersecting commitments to social justice are made imaginable in science museums, science centers, and similar organizations. Yet our experiences attest to how far from real these claims about inclusion are.

In our experience, professionalism was a difficult terrain to navigate in the battlefield of equity and social justice in public science institutions. We found that personifying anti-racism practice turned us into “the enemy” more often than not. For the women of color amongst us in particular, being made to literally embody institutional diversity agendas felt like the sword of Damocles—a very visceral, constant threat—despite being alive to the apparent privilege of working in places like museums and science centers (Arts Council of England, 2018). As Vanessa put it “everyone is happy at the start, and then you become the problem.” Institutions simultaneously deployed us when it was deemed appropriate and shut down, accused, and threatened us when our work was deemed too troubling to the status quo.

Echoing Sara Ahmed’s (2017) work, it was clear to us that in addressing the problems of institutional whiteness, racism, and the intersecting social injustices that mediate science and society relationships, more often than not we became “the problem.” We have all variously been accused of being anti-science, undermining our employers, and/or being anti-patriotic. While we were writing this chapter, both French and English government officials accused intersectional research (France) and critical race theory (UK) of “converg[ing] with terrorism” or being contrary to the law (Lagrave, 2020; Trilling, 2020). As people working at the interface of science and society relationships, these accusations are deeply problematic as they seek to undermine and threaten our expertise, professionalism, and employability.

We want to call attention here to how using particular people and projects to personify institutional diversity agendas actually protects institutional whiteness. It locates “the problem” and “the solution” with individual staff or projects, rather than institutional and social change. As such, institutions are able to mobilize the images and work of particular staff members—as we saw happen in the summer of 2020, when Black Lives Matter civil rights protests erupted around the world—in order to appear responsive, responsible, and relevant. As Subhadra put it “it’s kind of an alibi for the institution.”

Thinking with critical race theorist Derek Bell’s (1980, p. 522) idea of

“interest convergence,” we note that while we are not opposed to the potential gains to be made when our focus on anti-racist practice and institutional goals to appear socially responsible align, we note too that these alignments are limited. Namely, that such moments of convergence are all too brief, that business continues, by and large, as normal, that institutional whiteness remains intact and that we feel no less vulnerable as a result. Not least because, if anti-racist practice, decolonial approaches, or other social justice themes become suddenly unsavory, too threatening, or a source of potential reputational damage, the staff members whose work and presence symbolizes these themes (us!) are easily blamed and disposed of. When it came to “diversifying” staff, practices, and/or audiences, tokenism and personification were, in our experience, forms of institutionalized racism. In turning our work—and, additionally for the women of color amongst us, our racialized identities—into tokens, the underlying ethos of maintaining the status quo of institutional whiteness was all too visible.

Such systems make people vulnerable, especially for those of us who are women of color. For instance, as Vanessa, Rokia, and Subhadra put it:

Vanessa: When you are hired, partially as a token, you are expected to do stuff, but not shake the table.

Rokia: You are working within parameters that haven’t been explicitly laid out for you.

Subhadra: Your personal success is seen as a threat to the organization—how are you supposed to thrive in that kind of environment?

These systems reproduce racist power relations about who is and is not at home, welcome, or expected in particular institutions (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004).

As practitioners and researchers, we have seen first-hand how predominantly white institutions generate financial or reputational value by employing people from marginalized racial groups and by supporting small scale anti-racist projects, without genuinely supporting those individuals or projects, and without working toward institutional change. For instance, one of us recalled a former manager describing, without irony, how delighted they were to have employed her (a woman of color), because it made them and their whole institution look good in front of directors from other institutions. This kind of approach has been described as racial capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2018; Leong, 2013). It is a practice of institutional whiteness that parcels up work related to “diversity,” inclusion, and social justice as belonging to particular people and projects. It acts as an institutional appearance of good faith that protects against critique and radical change (Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2008; Tate & Page, 2018). It also provides straightforward scapegoats if institutions become uncomfortable. If the individuals and projects that stand in for inclusion pose a threat to the comfortable conditions of, for instance, sanitized, white histories of science or otherwise challenge dominant institutional norms of whiteness, their efforts can be quickly excised. This threat, in our experience, was keenly felt as a method of control. Thus, for us, questions of professionalism became questions about how to define an uneven battlefield in order to better navigate it.

We contend that our commitment to anti-racist work and social justice forms the very backbone of our professionalism just as it creates significant tensions. It is possible, we have found, to negotiate the tensions of the question “what I professional?” with strategy and cunning.

To what degree are we willing to engage in the battle?

All battles incur a human cost, a pain that must be lived through and recovered from. Having discussed the practicalities of navigating the inclusive/decolonial/anti-racist “battlefield,” our conversation would have been incomplete, lacking the honest vulnerability that makes such discussions restorative, without addressing the affective connotations associated with preparing for and participating in that battle. By this we simply mean what it feels like.

The feel of the various textures of the work itself: sometimes smooth and stealth-like wrapped in a veil of assimilation and other times, in keeping with more radical traditions, jagged and disruptive; ripping and tearing down structures to create space for the creation of better ones (Harney & Moten, 2013). But also how it made us feel—physically, mentally, emotionally—to do and to become this work. In addition to “becoming the problem,” as Vanessa put it, Sarah Ahmed (2018) describes how those who challenge power, in her case via processes of formal complaint, become sites of negation and are transformed into “leaky containers of negative affect, speaking out and spilling over.”

Vanessa, for instance, recalled a workshop she led where participants were asked to share different challenges that they were facing working on anti-racist practices. One participant explained how her management asked her to take the lead on inclusion within the organization. She described how she consciously pointed to different workplace issues, from microaggressions to problematic policies. However, she shared the feeling that, despite pointing to explicit and detailed problematic behaviors within the organization, she had failed to convince her colleagues and management to implement inclusive practices. She was, in fact, ignored. The rejection of these experiences as valid by management resulted in her internalizing the idea that she was the problem, not the racist institution.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, which inspired the theoretical and stylistic choices for this chapter, bell hooks (1994) emphasizes the importance of overcoming a mind/body split that implies that changes in consciousness, changing the way you think, are enough. She emphasizes the importance of becoming living examples of our politics instead, even in the face of resistance from those around us. With that in mind, we embrace such characterizations of transformation and embodiment, having no desire to preserve the facade, as some do in science, that objectivity is either possible or preferable. Collectively we agreed that the emotional component of entering this particular battle was inevitable. It changes you even as those you train and the institutions you work for are changed by you, with the former significantly outweighing the latter.

Our experiences led us to reflect on the deeply personal commitments and sacrifices each of us has made to conduct work that Subhadra rightly identified as being “personally, professionally and politically difficult.” These are the complex emotions associated with existing as an “other” attempting to dismantle and disrupt the multiply exclusionary science museums and centers we serve. These institutions embody for us the dynamic nature of power and oppression: reproducing and displaying ideas of our “otherness” while simultaneously privileging us as academics or practitioners. As such we navigate periods of pain and recovery in the face of various degrees of violence enacted institutionally and individually that persistently problematize our personhood.

It became clear through our conversations that much like the shape of the battle—seemingly mysterious before you encounter it—the violence our work

brought to us seemed unknowable until it was inflicted upon us. The element of surprise often deepened the pain and prolonged the recovery because it meant that we had given in to naïve assumptions about the protections our privilege as researcher or practitioners might offer. In truth, because institutions are embedded with and reflect the forms of oppression structuring wider social inequalities, which has long been the currency of colonization, such violence becomes a predictable (but no less harmful) reality of working toward antiracism and social justice in and around museums or science centers.

As with all interlocking systems of oppression, our experiences of violence were contextually specific and worked on micro- and macro- levels. It rendered us either invisible in meetings where our insights were ignored and spoken over, or hypervisible when our position as “other” was deemed useful: able to legitimate institutional decision making (Puwar, 2004). It traversed the boundary between our personal and professional lives, made increasingly porous by our initial desire, now a pandemic necessity, to be online.

Clémence: I remember an interaction I had on Twitter. I posted a piece I wrote on how to make maths more inclusive for women. It was not even that radical but I had an interaction with a diplomat where he called me “a swine” in response. As a privileged academic doing this work you don’t realize you’re in dangerous territory until you’re quite deep into it ... The racial issue wasn’t mentioned. I don’t know what he would’ve called me then.

The violence of this interaction brought us back to Toni Morrison’s (1975) words on racism which illuminate that, in addition to causing harm, the function of such acts steeped as they are in racist ideologies, is distraction: “It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again.” For Clémence it served to dehumanize. For Rokia and Emily whose works prompted challenges of their Blackness and whiteness respectively, their encounters were intended to delegitimize their presence within inclusive practice projects. In Clémence and Vanessa’s account of how discussions of racial justice in France are derailed by class discourse, the violence is inherent in the denial of how these issues are inextricably linked. It is a grab for territory: diminishing the fight for racial justice as class warfare and simultaneously white-washing the fact that many non-white people are also working class.

Subhadra: They bind you in a constant state of being gas-lit and validate your imposter syndrome, creating an environment so hostile that it acts as a form of violence in of itself.

The impact of individual or repeated violent encounters is significant. It forces us to expend time and energy constantly repairing the damage that existing in hostility inflicts. We must build ourselves back up to re-enter the battle and fight another day. This process can be exhausting and was amplified for those of us living at the intersections of multiple oppressions, knowing there are so many other battles to fight yet being unable to disengage from the consequences of public science organizations and practices designed to exclude us. We embrace this work as part of ourselves, making these acts of violence deeply personal.

We found that embracing and embodying the work created internal tensions

between staying and honoring our commitments and leaving museum spaces that might devour us, as an act of radical self-care—a tension between praxis and peace which left us feeling torn, because in the fashion of Paolo Freire (2006 [1970]), cultivating change in museums and science centers demands our involvement. He determines that real change is not a gift. It cannot be done or given to the oppressed, in our case those deliberately excluded, but must be brought about with them, with us. But what if the fight is more than you're able to endure? What if you are not in a position of privilege that enables you to walk away? In the end, as Subhadra elegantly reflected: “the price we have to be willing to pay is ourselves.”

A model of personal sacrifice is far from ideal. Having a clear understanding of the landscape or battlefield before engaging in the work offers, however, a opportunity to prepare, to fortify yourself and make empowered decisions regarding how much you are willing to embrace and endure.

Rokia: It's an individual journey. People need to make these decisions for themselves in ways that serve them best.

Ultimately it was clear that we remain committed to this work because we believe the transformative power of science and the potential for museums and similar institutions to act as vehicles for social change. When museums curate exhibition that center the voices of the marginalized or acknowledge the harms inflicted onto communities whose heritage make up exhibitions, it acts as a signal to wider society. It says that these narratives have value and demands that publics who engage with them reckon with interconnected legacies of oppression, colonialism, racism, sexism, and ableism (among others) that underpin contemporary hierarchies of power present within and between nations.

Vanessa: We do this work because when you know the system is broken, you know there is no point carrying on until it is fixed.

At the same time, we acknowledge that these aims will only be reached if the ways we construct and collectively make sense of knowledge are driven by decolonial, anti-racist, and inclusive theory and praxis. We see what is broken and believe using our skills and privilege to work with institutions is the best way we can make tangible changes. The alternative maintains and guarantees the past, present, and future erasure of ourselves and so many erased “others” from public narratives of science.

Victory strategies

In this light, it is important to remember that what we do need not be solitary and impossible work. You can expect small and big victories, internal and external allies and even peace. There are ways to harness institutional patterns and practices in order to do the work you want to do. As Emily described it, “there are no grand plan solutions short of massive social change but there are ways of living and coping and trying to push for change within this.” All of us have managed to get projects funded and completed, even if sometimes it feels insufficient. It feels like this because we cannot provide all the solutions to a problem we did not create.

As decolonization approaches are both bottom-up and top-down processes, depending on our position or our seniority within our institution, we have adopted different tactics and certainly have had to circumvent obstacles and find creative

strategies to achieve our goals. For Subhadra, this involved working directly with colleagues in the University Estates team to ensure there were no bureaucratic obstructions to her installing labels in the windows of university buildings for her exhibition on the history of eugenics at University College London. As with all battles, money is pivotal. Emily confirmed “the tragically deep joy of having funded research projects has meant I can discuss anti-racist practice, social justice, intersectional feminism, museums’ roles in the class war etc., because a fancy funder is behind it.” As a practitioner, Vanessa shared the same experience by applying for her own grants, designing projects, building partnerships, and hiring staff—she managed to have significant institutional impact and to outgrow the role that was given to her, even if it took her a decade.

While working on anti-racist practices in science museums and science engagement institutions, we have also learned the hard way to stop seeking validation from the institutions themselves. We have all come out of meetings feeling quite miserable, having been misrepresented and framed as “critical of science” or otherwise unprofessional. This is a false rhetoric based on a neoliberal co-option of the idea of science, where any criticism of scientific research is seen as iconoclasm and the idea of a historically and socially situated western science remains unacceptable. On the contrary, thinking about inclusion in science, whether in museums, science centers, or elsewhere, calls for giving up both the colonial trope of science as a zero sum game and white knowledge as a standard: we need to diversify the canon (McKittrick, 2014; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Clémence: I now think that confrontation and validation of our work on science inclusion should be sought elsewhere, with those who are excluded.

Beyond recognition, practitioners’ and researchers’ networks on decolonization and inclusion allow us to overcome our feelings of isolation by sharing collective experiences, providing mutual support, giving advice, and sharing resources. Both Subhadra and Vanessa co-founded and are members of different networks, most notably Museum Detox and Equity@Ecsite. For Vanessa, Equity@Ecsite was a group where she could transform her professional trauma and frustration into creativity, recharge her batteries and embrace being a “mold breaker or, as Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 17) put it a “feminist killjoy.”

Conclusion

You find us all, women experienced in doing anti-racist work in predominantly white institutions, battle-weary but unbowed. The problem we all collectively face is the complicity of science in the project of white supremacy, and the consistent, systemic denial of this fact through the mechanisms of museums and science centers that we work with. It is still shocking how few people know this history, including really learned people. What is more shocking still is how the work of redressing this balance of power remains marginalized as the sole province of non-white people when in reality it is the whole of society who are complicit and disadvantaged by it.

Emily: Lots of people have questioned my choices [as a white woman] to do this work, because they cannot instantly see why this question is relevant to me.

In fact, the solution is solidarity. What is required is intersectional activism including (but not limited to) feminism, anti-ableism, and anti-racism. We do not see ignoring endemic racism and other social injustices as an option because we do not want to build our worlds on racist foundations.

This work ends up being our work because of the structural and systemic injustices in our societies. While in our discussions we railed against the extremely problematic, damaging, and violent aspects of our professional experiences (the battle), we also saw opportunities to work toward the personal, institutional, and social changes we are committed to. For instance, in terms of questions about what constitutes professional practice, we note that what Charles W. Mills (2003, p. 190) termed the “motivated inattention” of institutional whiteness can leave a significant amount of wiggle room for those interested in subverting and reclaiming institutional norms, spaces, knowledges, and practices. Similarly, we have all used moments of interest convergence to further our own goals. We agreed, for example, that we were happy to ride the wave of decolonial approaches becoming fashionable, but noted we had been committed to such approaches before they were fashionable, and would still be there, doing the same work, once they were no longer in fashion. Thus, as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) suggest, you do not need to sign up to an institution’s values to use its resources, by whatever means necessary for your own ends or community needs.

White researchers and practitioners can mobilize their privilege to engage in this work and contribute as a form of allyship. We do this work not because it is our chosen subject or vocation, or because we have been directed by the hands of our institutions to do it (although both of these may also be true). We do it because we see a flaw in our overarching system for looking at and understanding the world, and we want to draw attention to and fix this flaw. While no one feels the problem ours, the battle to solve it has to be. As long as we are all talking at what seem to be cross-purposes, nothing is going to change.

Fundamentally, the decision as to whether or not you want to do this work—however you are racialized—is down to you. We have written this chapter to share our experiences and the strategies that have enabled us to survive, and sometimes even succeed, so far. Constructing this chapter felt cathartic, much like Frantz Fanon’s (2008 [1967], p. 145) idea of “collective catharsis. Serving as a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the forms of aggression can be released”—a safe environment in which the negative effect that has become a part of us could be released without further problematization. To be surrounded by women who are for all intents and purposes successful, working from different academic and cultural backgrounds and from different social locations, who own a struggle that feels both unique and collective. To have the space to remind ourselves and each other that we are not the problem and how this work makes us feel is valid. The work being personal does make it harder but it also makes it feel more worthwhile.

Rokia: I do this because I love science and I want science to be better.

Vanessa: Our job is to make dominant groups see the problem, and when they’ve seen the problem, then we can all move on together.

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