BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN CULTURAL SPACES

A GUIDE TO ACTION

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CONTENT

GLOSSARY

BIPoC

The acronym BIPoC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It emphasises Black and Indigenous Identities, highlighting the structural discriminations these communities face. As a political term, BIPoC is both, self-defining and empowering.

RACIALISATION

Racialisation is the social process through which individuals or groups are assigned a particular ‘racial’ identity, basing on perceived physical traits or cultural characteristics. Racialisation does not base on biological traits but is a social construct that shapes how people are treated within institutional systems. It creates and maintains power dynamics and social hierarchies, often leading to discrimination and marginalisation of certain communities.

WHITENESS

Whiteness refers to a racialised social identity that is positioned as superior to others within a system of racial hierarchy. It is shaped by social and cultural processes rooted in European colonialism, imperialism, and transatlantic slavery, and is maintained through institutions, ideologies, and everyday practices. Whiteness involves material advantages, such as economic and political power, but also symbolic value, tied to cultural associations of morality and civilisation. This results in benefits for white people that are perceived as societal norms, masking the unjust nature of white dominance.

INTRODUCTION

This guide aims to help embrace BIPoC communities that are still underrepresented in contemporary cultural spaces. It gives a theoretical insight into differing approaches to the question, between representation and diversity, while also aiming to give a few first concrete actions to change the status quo.

When speaking of cultural spaces, we are referring to the large palette of rooms that propose a cultural offer, from theatres to museums and concert halls. They play a central role in the structuring of our contemporary societies, as they are places of leisure, of reflection, and of community. The latter are central to this guide: we will look at which communities occupy a lot of space, and which are only marginally presented in these spaces.

Culture is the conglomerate of the expressions, may they be linguistic, musical, or cinematographic, that are shared by a group, that allow to identify with this given group. Indeed, the cultural sector allows to form social cohesion, new common imaginaries, and provides guidance in societal transformations. In times of multiple crises, cultural expression is of particular importance as it permits to process what has been experienced, to question current events, and to show alternative paths. Via culture, a group can collectively take a critical distance from a circumstance to reflect on, and react to it.

But western societies are influenced by structural inequalities that do not spare the cultural industries. These structures influence how someone is represented in cultural expression. The cultural sphere is subject to and thus reproduces dominant power structures, which impacts who works in culture and who has the power to make decisions, to resume: whose perspectives are more and whose less represented.

This is precisely where this guide intervenes. We will focus on BIPoC communities to understand how their current situation in the cultural sector is historically embedded, and how the sector can work on these structures.

STATUS QUO

European nation states have a long history of imperialism, which provoked waves of migration during and after colonisation. Colonialism was embedded in racial theory, suggesting that Caucasian civilisations are the most developed and sophisticated, conferring them features such as reason and logic. At the same time, people of color were said to be less developed and under civilised, virtually close to animalistic nature. This thinking justified the colonial project, and still profoundly impacts today's social organisation (Baumeister, 2021).

As everything else in our societies, the cultural sector's functioning is deeply influenced by our common past. This process was outlined by Abdelmalek Sayad (1999), who coined the concept of *state thinking*, together with Pierre Bourdieu.

> **According to this concept, the state apprehends the world through various categories that can be of economic, social, cultural, or ethical nature. These are in turn determined by the mental structures of the nation. The mental structures are a foundation for a national community and are influenced by past events.**

At the same time they determine how the members of a state's community will apprehend the world and future events. The mental structures of European societies are heavily influenced by their histories, which impacts BIPoC communities and their ability to express themselves in cultural environments.

Sourisseau and Offroy remark that inegalitarian systems prevent all groups of society from expressing their cultural identity equally. In their work *"Cultural rights: a paradigm shift "*(*Les droits culturels, un changement de paradigme*) *(2022)* the authors argue that in the backdrop of globalisation, which facilitates the circulation of cultural goods, not all cultures have equal influence on each other. They cite western colonialism and its outcomes as sources of these inequalities and speak of 'relationships of cultural domination', that work intersectionally and intertwine, compensate, combine, or accumulate in consonance with one's social background, ethnic origin, age, gender, language, or religion. Sourisseau and Offroy pinpoint this down to the social and historical construction of our references and identities, that are infused by institutionalised norms. Here they refer to the same process as Sayad, outlining how our thinking is embedded in social norms. This implies that the colonial past, as well as the hierarchisation of other social markers such as age or religion, result in certain individuals being valued more than others in the public realm. This inevitably leads to problems of representation in our creative industries.

CULTURAL RIGHTS AS FRAMEWORK

Countless strategies and concepts have been devised to tackle this situation. One of these are cultural rights, which are attractive given that they are widely agreed on and enshrined as a fundamental right. Cultural rights have a conceptual dimension that informs contemporary cultural policies, while moving towards a legal dimension. However, this legal dimension remains peripheral, as international law is difficult to enforce in concrete terms.

The most important paper on cultural rights is the *Fribourg Declaration*, which was adopted in 2004 by a group of international experts in the field of human rights, cultural diversity, and minority protection. It recognises the universal right to participate in cultural life, and to live and express one's cultural references.

A cultural identity is the range of cultural influences through which an individual, alone or within a community, defines their identity, expresses themselves, and seeks recognition of their dignity.

A cultural community refers to a group of people who share a common cultural identity that they seek to preserve and develop. The Fribourg Declaration makes these two elements fundamental rights, and states that everyone is free to choose their cultural identity, as well as the cultural community to which they wish to adhere.

Thus, the idea of a 'hegemonic culture' is discarded and the equality of all forms of cultural expression is proned. Moreover, it affirms that all cultural identities must be respected, for together they form the diversity of humanities' cultural heritage.

Diverse societies in turn need to accord space and respect to every cultural identity and community. The implementation of these principles would be the ideal prerequisite to reinforce BIPoC communities cultural expression.

The question how to implement these universal rights persists. Cultural rights remain interesting because they show a theoretical advance in the conceptualisation of the place that culture takes in our societies, and because they are broadly recognised. Cultural rights as a theoretical, political and, to a very limited extent, legal tool might serve as a context for rethinking the representation within our cultural spaces.

DIVERSITY

A common approach when aiming to create mixed cultural environments, including BIPoC and white communities, is **diversity**. Be it governments, the European Union, companies in the private sector, or structures in the cultural world – when it comes to establishing a strategy to integrate racialised people into projects, diversity is mentioned rather abruptly, often coupled with the call for more inclusivity.

Some scholars have taken an analytical distance from the concept. In her book *On Being Included – Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Sara Ahmed critically explores diversity policies and acknowledges that the concept is seemingly omnipresent as

"We are told that diversity is good for us. It makes for an enriched multicultural society" (p.51).

Ahmed (2012) explains that diversity has two semantic dimensions: it can be employed as an adjective while it also bears a normative meaning. As an adjective it is a way to describe an organisation and its qualities. In its normative dimension, it is the expression of priorities and inherently positive values. Ultimately, both are linked as the adjective becomes normative: when someone uses the term diversity as an adjective, it involves the normative judgment that diversity is positive.

> **Diversity even has an aesthetic dimension, given the many images that are purposefully created to evoke the term and its normative dimension. A typical example for this is picturing smiling faces of different skin colors on a university or company brochure.**

Indeed, the term can be used to rebrand organisations. Nirmal Puwar (2004) argues that diversity has come "overwhelmingly to mean the inclusion of people who look different" (p.1), and Ahmed (2012) affirms that

> **"If diversity becomes something that is added to organisations, like color, then it confirms the whiteness of what is already in place." (p.33).**

She argues that diversity often unveils institutional whiteness, implying that institutions are shaped by histories of whiteness that have a profound influence on their current identity. Here, we can weave the thread to Sayad's concept of mental structures, which are fundamental to white institutions.

In this context, diversity is sometimes adopted to "mask" institutional whiteness and to create institutional images that are produced for external entities. We can call this principle performative diversity. Grassroots organisations that advocate for more representation of BIPoCs in the cultural world have also tied diversity to white institutions, stating that it is not a relevant concept to their work.

Generally, Ahmed (2012) remarks that the term diversity has replaced terms such as social justice or equality, and thus lost the connection to struggles against systematic inequalities. Along the same lines, in the *Decolonializing Europe Booklet* (Faye-Rexhepi et.al., 2023), Max Arto de Ploeg cites Angela Davis on the matter:

> **It seems that the term diversity has colonised all of our struggles for social justice. When you only do the visible dimension of diversity you might end up with a group that is more conservative than the white people you try to diversify. Until we combine diversity with social justice, we only end up with diversity that makes no difference at all. (p.10)**

Diversity in the cultural sector also has been examined with a less critical lens, suggesting that effective diversity in cultural institutions needs to go beyond its visible form of individuals' skin color. Yingling (2020) argues that a meaningful approach to diversity must be linked to cultural diversity, as defined in the Fribourg Declaration allowing all individuals to thrive in their cultural community. In her text she analyses how white institutions can create mixed spaces via a meaningful approach to diversity.

She distinguishes between diverse environments and diverse ideas, pointing out that it can be unethical to invite or hire people solely based on their physical appearance.

If an institution realises that its ideas are not diverse enough, she suggests identifying who is missing from the ideation process. Instead of engaging in community outreach, as this can be reminiscent of the rescue syndrome, she proposes that white institutions should present themselves as an equal partner to the communities they want to engage with.

For Yingling, diversity and inclusion are inherently linked. Inclusion occurs when "the relationship between two classes is such that all members of one are also members of the other" (p.49). Diversity is a concept embraced by various groups, which can be beneficial, but may also be counterproductive if misunderstood or misapplied. Representation, in contrast, involves fewer groups in its conceptual framework. In this context, it is mainly the impacted group that takes the initiative to address and improve its own circumstances.

REPRESENTATION

Stuart Hall's work *"Representation – Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices"* (1997), bases on the assumption that culture entails the production and exchange of meaning in a society. This meaning organises our living-together and the accepted norms in society.

According to Hall, the way we represent things reflects the meanings we accord to them. In turn, they need to be interpreted meaningfully by others.

In the chapter "*The Spectacle of the Other,*" the author develops the history of popular racialised representations in Europe that started being produced during colonialism. These representations reflected racialised discourses that are structured by binary opposites such as 'civilised versus savage' or 'culture versus nature'. Over time, they transformed into stereotypes, that according to Hall "tend to occur where there are gross inequalities of power" (p.259). Stereotypes are characterised by their essentialising, reductionist, and naturalising nature, while symbolically fixing boundaries that maintain the order that designates *The Other*[1]. Black Artist Database co-founder Kay Ferdinand describes that many black artists still struggle with othering:

> **"There is an expectation that they will perform in line with the stereotypes historically associated with black people"[2]. This hinders them from being seen as individual artists, creatives and storytellers.**

Representations, quite obviously, are a matter of equality as well as power relations. According to Hall,

> **"A discourse produces, through different practices of representation (scholarship, exhibition, literature, painting), a form of racialised knowledge of The Other (Orientalism) deeply implicated in the operations of power" (p.260).**

European culture is profoundly marked by the idea of its own superiority on other cultures, which has influenced

former colonial powers to create stereotyped representations of others, justifying the superiority of Europe at the hand of these representations. This still impacts the European cultural sector today, as it inherits from colonial mental structures.

The unreserved expression of one's own identity through creative means continues to be a privilege stemming from a position of power that is often not granted to racialised artists.

Moreover, representation should not only be applied to artistic processes, but more globally to the expression of ideas. In a Eurocentric framework, many ideas and issues are viewed narrowly, often marginalising diverse perspectives and reinforcing stereotypes. Hence, to effectively represent a topic, it is crucial to embrace multiple viewpoints, especially those from marginalised communities. This inclusive approach not only enriches our understanding but also challenges dominant narratives, illuminating often overlooked complexities.

Stuart Hall argues that it is important for BIPoCs to determine their own representations, since this disrupts power relations and can have a significant positive impact on the emancipation of BIPoCs in predominantly white societies. In the way our cultural representations are currently managed, this implies that racialized people are part of cultural structures and participate not only as actors in films or musicians on stage, but also take their place at other strategic points in the cultural sector, such as in event programming or curation.

This is not to say that there is no space where racialised communities cannot express themselves freely. Often, authentic representation takes place in grassroots, community spaces that do pioneering work in developing strategies that differ from what is possible in traditionally structured institutions. Some go as far to argue that genuine representation is only possible in self-organized spaces as they have the possibility to question and challenge every aspect of the organisation, which is not possible in institutions. However, we want to explore the possibility to apply these strategies to the cultural sector more broadly, including institutionalised spaces.

DIVERSITY VS REPRESENTATION

Diversity and Representation are two radically different approaches. Representation emphasises the self-determination of racialised people, and is consequently embedded in anti-colonial thinking. According to Hall, it is a medium to break away from the power structures inherited from colonialism. Diversity, as theorised by Ahmed (2012) on the other hand, emerged from white institutions, which some-

times simply aim to conceal their whiteness as 'it is the right thing to do', since diversity is considered inherently positive. However, despite these criticisms, for representation to take place, it is necessary for cultural structures to engage in a process of transformation, since today they are predominantly white. This is where Yingling's (2020) strategy to create meaningful collaborations with community partners to create sustainable diversity in a structure, can be helpful.

Diversity remains a concept open to multiple understandings. For a lack of more precise terms, the use of 'diversity' allows cultural structures to communicate that they are aware of injustices and work towards positive change within this framework. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that diversity is inherently geographically and culturally located, as who is minorised depends on the historical construction of a society. Cultural organisations represent very different art forms, from heritage sites to festivals, and the structures of their sector of activity certainly influence their vision of diversity. However, some patterns in the framing of diversity remain.

1. One recurrent way to conceptualise diversity is **diversity with a particular focus on gender equality,** which describes groups that hold gender equality as their core mission but 'explore' other forms of discrimination. The emphasis on gender equality is certainly paramount while still limiting, as it overlooks other forms of discrimination.

2. In addition to the **gender-focused approach**, another emerging perspective on diversity involves recognising all forms of discrimination at once and considering their intersectional[3] nature. As this accords all forms of oppression equal importance, this approach bears the potential to be a successful strategy to enhance the representation of BIPoC communities.

3. The last pattern is the **systemic or structural approach to inequalities**. It recognises that the cultural sector, like any other professional sector, is influenced by unequal histories of power that lead to marginalisation in the contemporary work environment. This is an important prerequisite to enabling BIPoC representation. To enhance the representation of BIPoC communities, a mix between an intersectional and a structural understanding of diversity is necessary.

Intersectionality is not only a question of ethical approach to diversity, but also allows us to understand the life experiences of BIPoC communities more in depth, as they are not only people of color but also gender minorities, religious minorities, refugees, and so on. On the other hand, for intersectionality to be operational, it needs to be informed by a deep understanding of where discriminations come from and how they are historically rooted.

WHAT TO DO

A Structured Learning Process

If one chooses to strengthen representation among their cultural organisation via a diversity framework, it is essential to clearly define and frame the latter.

For this, structures wanting to strengthen BIPoC representation through diversity strategies adopt an intersectional and historically anchored approach. Diversity strategies that address various forms of oppression, and see their intersections enable us to to understand these issues both individually and in relation to one another. This framework highlights the importance of BIPoC representation while connecting it to other forms of oppression. Adopting a historically rooted perspective helps to understand the deep connections between BIPoC communities and issues such as colonial history and the functioning of western institutions. Recognising these connections is essential to start the process of dismantling the dominance of whiteness within these institutions.

This framework would start out with a structured learning process focused on different forms of oppression and their historical roots. Participants would engage in exploring various oppressions, such as racism, disability discrimination, LGBTQIA+ phobia and ageism, examining how these issues are deeply embedded in societal structures like patriarchy, capitalism, and neo-colonialism. Next, cultural structures would reflect on how these oppressive structures impact their own networks and daily work. This involves identifying and listing the consequences that arise from these influences. Finally, it will be essential to set clear goals for what the participants aim to achieve through this process. By doing so, one can work towards meaningful change and greater equity within their communities.

Ideally, this process should be led by a professional specialised in diversity training, who has the necessary knowledge and capacity to navigate such a complicated conversation. Furthermore, it is crucial to communicate and justify the chosen framework for engaging with diversity across the entire organisation.

Ideally, everyone engaged in the space should be aligned on the definition of diversity and have the opportunity to express their views on this framing. This collective understanding will significantly ease the implementation of diversity efforts.

Creating Encounters and Discussions with Communities

The creation of encounters between networks and communities as a way of getting to know each other and gaining mutual trust is central to strengthening representation in cultural structures. An important question to consider is how often different communities come together in cultural spaces to meet, exchange ideas, and discuss topics that are relevant to both groups. One of the key points is to explore new ways of fostering connections, whether by organising meetings around advocacy issues

or by inviting communities to attend events.
These opportunities for interaction not only help build relationships and trust but also create a foundation for further collaboration before individuals are expected to become formal members of organisations with which they may have had no prior connection.

Exchanging with minority groups around a communal topic can create what Yingling (2020) calls cultural awareness. The exchange will help identify the stakes involved for another community when it comes to a certain subject. In a reflexive approach, this can be an opportunity to become aware of one's own position and to recontextualize one's needs and priorities (cultural self-awareness), as well as to get to know those of another community (cultural awareness for the others). These steps might prove crucial to dismantle institutional whiteness, which is a prerequisite to engage in other measures proposed above.

Working Conditions

The working conditions within the cultural sector are central to the challenges in effectively implementing strategies to enhance the representation of BIPOC communities. Addressing a problem rooted in colonial legacies and their lasting impact on the identity of many cultural spaces requires a significant investment of time and effort. Building genuine relationships with these communities, founded on trust and mutual understanding, is a process that cannot be rushed.

Working conditions and mental health in the cultural sector are often overlooked, but they undeniably play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of efforts to improve representation.

Many cultural spaces operate with very small teams, ranging from just a few staff in smaller organisations to larger teams for more institutional structures. In addition, the work of many professionals in the cultural sector is often characterised by multitasking and the accumulation of responsibilities. This contributes to feelings of burnout and exhaustion that are common within the sector. Furthermore, both the cultural and non-profit sectors, of which these spaces are a part, are known for offering comparably low salaries.

The precarious nature of work in the cultural sector is closely linked to the under-representation of BIPOC communities within it. Many individuals working or studying in this field often have access to pre-existing support structures, which are typically rooted in more financially privileged backgrounds.

This comfort enables them to pursue careers in the cultural sector, despite the inherent risks of unstable income, freelance work, or temporary contracts. Additionally, the cultural sector typically requires a university-level education and is highly competitive, making entry even more difficult.

Another barrier is the overwhelmingly white nature of the sector, which creates its own set of challenges. This dominance shapes unwritten cultural codes around behaviour, language, and appearance, such as ways of

speaking, dressing, and networking, that people of color may not necessarily share or feel comfortable navigating.

The challenging working conditions in the European cultural sector create a dual barrier to progress. First, they limit the ability of those employed in the sector to engage deeply with issues of representation and inclusion, as overwork and financial instability leave limited room for meaningful advocacy. Second, the precarious conditions discourage people of color from entering the sector altogether, as the risks and barriers are too great for many with a reduced economic safety net. Together, these factors perpetuate the lack of diversity within the cultural sector, reinforcing existing inequalities and limiting the potential for meaningful change.

TO KEEP IN MIND

Addressing the representation of BIPoC communities in the cultural sector requires a deep understanding of the historical roots of imperialism, which continue to shape our societies and hence the sector today. To avoid performative diversity, a meaningful approach, allowing to move beyond visual representation should be adopted. This requires learning about other life realities and to openly approach communities. Although diversity is a limited concept, it remains essential for restructuring organisations in a way that enables genuine representation. Indeed, authentic representation should enable BIPOC communities to shape artistic expression, with cultural workers understanding their perspectives.

To achieve this, a structured, collective learning process is necessary—one that understands the history and current construction of a cultural space before learning how to dismantle these structures. It is crucial to create encounters with communities to foster cultural awareness and to tie the discussion of better working conditions with the demand for BIPoC representation, as this process is long and requires sustainable structures. Ultimately, the most effective strategy for fostering authentic BIPoC representation is through an intersectional approach that is both historically informed and contextually relevant.

NOTES

1 In using this term, the author refers to Edward Said's work Orientalism (1978), in which Said explains the influence of colonial and imperialist thought on the production of discourse and knowledge about non-Western regions.

2 Interview with Kay Ferdinand, Co-founder, Black Artist Database

3 The concept was introduced in her text "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" (1989) and was reiterated in her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1989)

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