

# WOR CULTURE - IS CULTURE BAD FOR YOU? WHAT DOES "ACCESS" MEAN WHEN WE ARE TALKING ABOUT CULTURE AND CULTURAL CAREERS?

Welcome to this reflection from our **Wor Culture** event **Is culture bad for you? What does "access" mean when we are talking about culture and cultural careers?** Here, we'll share the presentations and reflect some of the discussions.

For those of you who couldn't be with us for our zoom gathering, further information on what **Wor Culture** is about can be found at the end of this document. Please get in touch if you'd like to contribute, have any suggestions, or would like to share any links or resources.

We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events.

The #WorCulture team,

James - Acting Dean of Culture and Creative Arts [james.annesley@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:james.annesley@ncl.ac.uk)

Kirsten - Acting Associate Dean of Engagement and Place (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) [kirsten.gibson@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:kirsten.gibson@ncl.ac.uk)

Bob (Engagement and Place Projects Manager) [bob.allan@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:bob.allan@ncl.ac.uk)

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## Presentations

Our event included a presentations from **Papi Moises Jeovani** is a 25 year old BAME actor, spoken word artist and theatre maker based in Newcastle, and **Chris Connel** a Newcastle based working class actor living a conflicted middle-class life.

## VIDEO

Watch the full presentations here <https://youtu.be/WLsq-qURNU0>

## BREAKOUT ROOMS

After the presentations we split into Breakout Rooms (smaller discussion groups), here's a summary of the key points from those groups.

If the cultural and heritage sector felt accessible to everyone, what would it sound, look and feel like? If we can agree that access and representation are important - what message would you give organisations, funders and what is one thing you can do in your own work to move towards a more accessible and representative sector?

### Removing barriers

- Access to artistic spaces is limited by political, economic and structural barriers.
- The cultural and heritage sector should look and feel less intimidating and more welcoming.
- There is a perception that arts are "posh" but galleries and arts spaces should be free public spaces that should be welcoming. This perception of "posh" is connected to barriers experienced by cultural producers, that only the wealthy can afford the financial insecurity of a freelance creative career, which then limits the cultural relevance of the art produced and represented in galleries etc.. Freelancers talked about having 27 different jobs and diversifying their own experience as much as possible to make ends meet!
- Headway Arts was founded because when growing up Allie was told she was mad to want to be an artist, and told to be 'something useful' instead. This is about cultural relevance but also about getting a job with income stability for artists from low income backgrounds.
- If you don't have an independent income or a family supporting you then it is hard to access the sector, as we see from the 'intern industry' where those with support who are more able to take up unpaid internships and paid internships are rare.
- D6 represents artists who have been displaced by forced migration and whose practice has been disrupted by external factors, the boundary between supporting a marginalised group and instrumentalising them, which was reflected in both Chris's comments about 'voyeurism' and Papi's about 'code-switching' - 'they want me to be black, but not black, I don't know what they want me to be' were discussed.
- There is also a complete lack of information about how you start or sustain a career in the arts. There is a veil over what an artist's career looks like for someone at school or just starting out, and no information about avenues to explore or what it looks like to be a freelancer. It was thought that these "veils" protect power groups.
- The arts are a powerful inclusion and engagement tool for opening up more diversity. 'Imposter syndrome' of not feeling you 'fit in' in the arts was also discussed, as though they are only for a small group of power brokers and not a reflection of humanity as a whole.
- Create physical spaces to feel truly engaging
- Avoid cyclic attitude in which the same people put themselves forward
- I think it's fascinating that working class folks I knew as a teenager/early 20s who have gone on to act professionally and moved to London - they have completely shed their accent and taken on this uber posh one in order to fit in to the drama world. It's really bizarre as an adult to meet up with them and hear them talk. They talk about feeling shame for being Northern at points in their career.

- Often find you have to adapt to the places rather than the places adapting to support you
- Example of different recruitment methods from Helix Arts, not asking people to submit CVs which can be challenging and off-putting if you're from a background where putting a CV together is something you're not used to doing.

### **Meaningful dialogue**

- Openness and two-way communication is needed to make the arts more inclusive, not just a power group communicating what they want from producers and artists but also those creatives and facilitators being able to say what they want. There was some acknowledgement that this is starting to happen at a grassroots level where some arts programmes are based on need rather than what is considered to be art by more powerful groups in the sector.
- Trust building is crucial
- It is important for both small and large organisations to work with different community groups
- People need to listen more and have dialogue with communities, some arts organizations can be quite snobbish, and assuming what a working class community wants without consulting them. Dialogue, and listening just isn't really happening apart from on a superficial level that is very short term. There's no long term investment

### **Funding and investment**

- Funders need to consider more opportunities for the unprivileged talented individuals.
- The importance of investment in the arts and pathways for young people was discussed. It was noted that while there was more investment in the recent round of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding there is still inequity when compared to other regions.
- There is also the issue of working class people now can't afford to get educated in the arts because of the debt which is further limiting accessibility.
- Funders need to understand the amount of lean in time that is essential for meaningful engagement

### **Greater representation**

- There needs to be greater representation in the workforce, particularly access for young.
- There particularly needs to be more representation of underrepresented groups in larger organisations with core funding, such as people with disabilities, people from ethnic minorities, women, and working class people.
- Underrepresented voices aren't heard and organisations don't have a profile or presence in underrepresented communities.
- As someone from a historically marginalised community who has suffered a huge amount of cultural appropriation past and present, it's so important that people like us not only have a place in the arts and culture sector but that our culture stops being appropriated. As you'll see from the links below we are making progress, but we need more and we need it as quickly as possible, especially in the North where in many parts of our counties the Gypsy and Traveller communities are the largest ethnic minority groups.

## What next?

- It is great to have these personal experiences - eloquently told – but important also to think of how as a sector we can respond. Importance of great venues like Alphabet, but important to recognise that venues like Theatre Royal also bring in lots of people every year to pantos and musicals that don't go to other cultural events. I guess we all have places where we feel welcome/not welcome so we need a plurality of venues/organisations and practitioners.
- Until organisations and funders put investment into this long term piece of work it is not really going to change, and groups like this (attendees of this event) could really help to put pressure on those organizations to say 'how are you really working with communities that are really left out, ignored and not represented? Because otherwise, if we don't do it, nobody else is going to.'
- It would be great to continue this conversation, after this event we've got some blogs that we're going to be putting out over the next few weeks which will give some other perspectives. Through North East Cultural Freelances we'd like to start shining a light on the great practice, where are the spaces that people are feeling welcomed into? Where is the work really engaging audiences that are maybe lesser represented elsewhere? And where is co-creation happening in a really meaningful and authentic way? We're especially interested in work which isn't core funded, where organizations are using their own resourcefulness to create change one and also where are those spaces where resources can be shared with each other so we can create, for want of a better description, a toolkit that people can access and see where great work is happening, and how maybe they could replicate that within their own work. [info@culturalfreelancers.org](mailto:info@culturalfreelancers.org)
- What else can be done within organisations but equally each of us have individual responsibility for our own work as well. What can we all do? Because I'm very much a believer that we all have power in our own areas of influence. So what can we do to ensure that we're being more accessible, opening doors, or creating opportunities and making space for people.

## LINKS

This is a list of some links shared during the session. If you have any other resources you would like to add to this list please email [bob.allan@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:bob.allan@ncl.ac.uk)

- Is Culture Bad For You? <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526144164/>
- The Romani Wordsworth: An Interview With Storyteller And Author Richard O'Neill <https://www.darkusmagazine.com/post/the-romani-wordsworth-an-interview-with-storyteller-and-author-richard-o-neill>