



INTERSECTIONALITY, Decolonisation, and YOUNG PEOPLE IN HERITAGE

WE DON'T SETTLE

Introduction

This document explores how Intersectionality and Decolonisation can shape a more inclusive and equitable heritage sector. These principles are especially relevant to the work of We Don't Settle (WDS), an organisation that empowers young People of Colour to challenge systemic barriers in heritage spaces. By centring the lived experiences of marginalised communities, WDS applies Intersectionality and Decolonisation to create opportunities for underrepresented voices to lead, contribute, and shape the future of the sector.

Intersectionality is critical to WDS's mission because it highlights how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, and class, impact young people's opportunities and challenges in the heritage sector. Decolonisation aligns with WDS's commitment to dismantling colonial legacies in institutions by amplifying voices historically excluded from decision-making and representation. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for WDS to drive change in heritage spaces.

WDS works with young people to explore innovative approaches to heritage, fostering inclusive narratives that reflect diverse identities and histories. By highlighting their voices and building their skills, WDS ensures that marginalised communities are not just represented but empowered to lead. This summary highlights practical insights gained through WDS initiatives, aiming to inspire organisations and individuals to rethink how diversity and inclusion are approached in heritage spaces.

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, explains how different aspects of a person's identity (such as race, gender, class, and ability) overlap and interact to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. For example, a Black woman may face challenges that differ from those faced by white women or Black men, as her experiences are shaped by both her race and gender.

What is Intersectionality?

Historical Context

The concept of Intersectionality originated as a way to address the inability of legal systems to account for overlapping forms of discrimination. For instance, courts in the 1980s often required plaintiffs to choose between discrimination based on race or gender, ignoring the combined impact of both. Crenshaw's work highlighted how systems of power operate on multiple levels, influencing the lived experiences of marginalised groups.

Intersectionality also builds upon decades of work in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, which sought to address the compounding effects of identity-based oppression. Activists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks emphasized the importance of recognizing multiple layers of discrimination, a foundation that continues to inform Intersectionality today.

Understand how different audiences perceive heritage spaces and ensure programming reflects diverse stories and perspectives.

Go beyond surface-level diversity to address systemic barriers, such as hiring practices and leadership representation.

Collaborate with marginalised communities to create more authentic and inclusive narratives.

Ensure accessibility for all identities, including those shaped by socio-economic status, disability, and more.

Incorporate intersectionality in exhibition design, ensuring that artifacts and displays are contextualised with multiple perspectives.

EXAMPLE:

WDS's "UNLOCKED" programme reframes history through the lens of marginalised communities, encouraging young people to challenge dominant colonial narratives in heritage. A participant noted: "This programme made me see how my history and culture could be valued and shared."

Practical Application in Heritage

What is Decolonisation?

Decolonisation involves undoing the effects of colonialism by reclaiming cultural identities, addressing historical injustices, and challenging systems that perpetuate inequality. For heritage institutions, this means rethinking collections, repatriating artefacts, and ensuring diverse perspectives are represented.

Colonialism was a centuries-long project where powerful nations seized control of lands, resources, and people, imposing their values and systems of governance. Decolonisation aims to dismantle these legacies, acknowledging the harm caused and striving for restorative justice. This process is ongoing and requires institutional commitment to systemic change.

Decolonisation also involves confronting uncomfortable truths about the past. Many heritage institutions were built on wealth extracted through colonial exploitation, often preserving narratives that glorify colonisers while marginalising or erasing the stories of those who were oppressed. Decolonisation seeks to correct these imbalances by bringing previously excluded voices to the forefront.

Historical Context

Practical Application in the Heritage Sector

Work with local communities to reframe exhibitions and ensure their voices are included in decision-making.

Prioritise long-term, meaningful change over temporary trends or tokenistic efforts.

Acknowledge the colonial histories of institutions and commit to transparency and restitution where possible.

Build frameworks for shared authority over narratives and collections, ensuring that historically excluded voices lead the dialogue.

Develop educational programming that highlights the ongoing impacts of colonialism and the importance of cultural reclamation.

EXAMPLE:

A partnership between WDS and a museum resulted in an exhibit where young people co-curated displays to include diverse perspectives on colonial artefacts. One curator shared, "It was empowering to help rewrite narratives and see our voices reflected."

Young people involved with WDS shared their experiences and suggestions for improving inclusion in the heritage sector:

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS:

Offer training in areas like bid-writing, advocacy, and public speaking to help young people build careers in heritage. Practical skills such as grant applications, project management, and leadership development were especially valued.

QUOTE:

"Learning how to advocate for myself and others was empowering. It gave me confidence to challenge traditional narratives in heritage."

REPRESENTATION:

Ensure diverse voices are not only present but empowered to make meaningful contributions. Avoid tokenism by creating opportunities for young people to influence decision-making.

EXAMPLE:

A young person shared how co-curating an exhibit helped them feel seen and validated within the heritage sector.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Focus on long-term relationships with marginalised communities rather than one-off events or photo opportunities. Build trust by delivering tangible benefits and maintaining consistency.

QUOTE:

"Trust isn't built overnight. WDS shows up for communities and sticks around to make a real difference."

As part of their feedback, young people generated a word cloud to represent their associations with "Intersectionality" and "Decolonisation." Key terms included:

FOR INTERSECTIONALITY:

"equity," "multiplicity," "lived experience," "interconnectedness," and "power dynamics." Participants emphasised that intersectionality requires actionable change and deeper understanding of overlapping identities.

FOR DECOLONISATION:

"reclamation," "justice," "truth," "culture," and "change." Many highlighted the generational effort required and the importance of ongoing dialogue between institutions and communities.

Key Themes Identified

1.

Intersectionality Requires Action: It's not just about diversity but addressing how power affects different groups. For example, heritage programming should actively consider barriers such as cost, accessibility, and cultural relevance.

2.

Decolonisation is a Journey: True change takes time and must involve collaboration with affected communities. Participants emphasised the importance of "ripple effects," where small but consistent changes accumulate over generations.

3.

Trust is Earned: Build trust by valuing young people's input and showing commitment to their development. Programmes that highlight lived experiences and amplify marginalised voices were particularly impactful.

CREATE AMBASSADORS:

Train young people as Intersectionality and Decolonisation Ambassadors to lead change in the heritage sector. Provide resources like software training, access to archives, and opportunities to gain experience in advocacy and leadership.

ENGAGE COMMUNITIES:

Host events and activities in underrepresented communities to build connections and showcase diverse histories. For example, intergenerational storytelling events or localised exhibitions can foster deeper engagement.

SET CLEAR PRINCIPLES:

Establish guidelines for partnerships to ensure alignment with values of inclusion and equity. Avoid partnerships that dilute the mission or fail to address systemic barriers.

INVEST IN LONG-TERM PROGRAMMES:

Focus on creating stable, recurring initiatives that align with the organisation's core values, such as mentorship programmes or community-based heritage projects.

SUSTAINABILITY BEYOND GRANTS:

Explore independent revenue streams, such as consultancy services, to reduce reliance on grant funding and maintain autonomy.

In Short

By embracing Intersectionality and Decolonisation, heritage institutions can create spaces that truly reflect and serve the diverse communities they represent. These practices are not one-time fixes but ongoing commitments requiring collaboration, transparency, and accountability. While the journey is complex, every step toward equity strengthens the sector and society as a whole.

The lessons shared here are rooted in the lived experiences of young people and heritage professionals. By integrating these insights, we can build a heritage sector that celebrates diversity, fosters inclusion, and reckons with the legacies of its past to create a more equitable future. Let's work together to ensure heritage spaces become platforms for empowerment and representation, inspiring future generations to contribute to a more inclusive society.

To learn more about WDS's programmes and how we embed co-creation in our practices, visit www.wedontsettle.com or reach out directly at info@wedontsettle.com to explore collaborative opportunities. Together, we can make a lasting impact in shaping an inclusive and equitable heritage, arts and cultural sector.



This guidebook was created based on the work of Dr. Kadian Pow, commissioned by We Don't Settle through the project We Don't Settle Fit for the Future. The project is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to strengthen our organisational resilience.

We thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their contribution to this piece of work.