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REVIEW

Desiring diversity at university

Sara Ahmed. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

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Diversity has become a pervasive feature of university policy statements in Australia, the United Kingdom and other nations. But what does diversity do and how does it perform in terms of addressing inequality in a university? Sara Ahmed answers these questions in a thesis supported by 21 interviews with diversity practitioners and her own experience. By interrogating diversity as a set of practices, Ahmed's book explores how diversity policy can become a substitute for action against practices of exclusion in an institutional setting. On Being Included *presents an argument for diversity workers to articulate exclusionary practices otherwise concealed by the appearance of diversity. This book argues for diversity to be a form of critique, not a public relations solution.*

Implementing diversity policy in an institution of higher education can be a tenuous and troubling process (Chan, 2005, pp. 142-151). Being more than the presence of a set of categories – typically beginning with race and gender – diversity extends to questions of inclusion and difference within a community (pp. 130-131). Sara Ahmed has examined this tenuous troubling process in her new book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, from the perspective of diversity practitioners working for universities in the United Kingdom and Australia.

According to Ahmed, the ambiguity and inspiration of diversity has enabled it to be readily incorporated into university policy. Perceiving this integration through the lens of Ernesto Laclau (2005, pp. 76-120), we could think of diversity performing as an empty signifier: Diversity being reproduced throughout a university policy network so long as

representation of diversity actions in the university resonated with its members' desire to realize diversity. However, anything appearing to threaten this identification with diversity could potentially unify its members in a community of antagonism against the appearance of such threats. The downside of this successful policy reproduction being that a perceived threat to the realization of diversity – such as a student complaining about unequal opportunity – may provoke an antagonistic frontier against the appearance of this threat. In other words, diversity becomes dangerous when a university community defends its pride against inequality complaints by attacking complaint actions rather than attending to the practices causing such complaints. This is how diversity can support the overlooking of everyday practices of unequal opportunity.

Ahmed describes the process by which an accusation of racism within a university community, proud of its diversity, comes to be heard as a potential injury to the university rather than as an injury to the accuser. The university, here, is imagined as a feeling subject by its community members: Racism is heard as an injury to the person spoken of – the university – not as an injury to the speaker. The community's instinctive response – to defend against hearing an attack on its desired credentials – can cause opportunities for engagement with inequality problems to be lost through failure to recognize injury to the speaker. This is what happens when diversity operates as an institutional solution, a narrative of repair, to cover up signs of injury inflicted through racist practice. By interrogating diversity as a set of practices, Ahmed explores how the presence of a diversity policy can substitute for action on diversity. In examining what diversity policy obscures and the systemic reproductions it supports, Ahmed asks how diversity participates in the creation of an ideal of the institution that allows racism and other inequalities to be overlooked. In addressing this question, Ahmed analyses data from 21 interviews conducted between 2003 and 2009 with diversity practitioners, mostly in higher educational institutions, in the United Kingdom and Australia. Ahmed attempts to follow diversity around university institutions in the form of documentation that provides diversity's physical and institutional form. Ahmed's goal is to develop a thick description of the world taking shape in the background as diversity comes to be used as a discursive object in the foreground of university policy networks.

On Being Included is more than an analysis of a set of interviews with diversity practitioners. The first chapter of this book reflects on the relationship between diversity and the almost unbearable omnipresence of whiteness at universities experienced by Ahmed. The second chapter deals with university blockages facing diversity practitioners despite the pervasiveness of diversity within university policy language. It describes the tactics used by diversity practitioners to identify and overcome these resistances. The third chapter examines how new equality regimes have an impact on what gets counted as equality and diversity. It also deals with the problems of diversity becoming a key performance indicator. The fourth chapter explores how statements of commitment to diversity can act as non-

performatives, not producing the effects named in such statements. The final chapter then reflects on the consequence of diversity being a tool for public relations, and how its use can inhibit discussion of racism. To counter the damage of diversity becoming a narrative of repair – diversity has solved the problem – Ahmed argues for diversity to be thought of as a continual questioning of practices. Something like, what are the implications of each action in terms of an ever-receding ethical horizon of diversity?

At various stages throughout the book, Ahmed reflects on her experience of embodying the socially-structured categories of black and woman; particularly how the black woman professor and the black woman diversity officer have been represented in university settings. However, Ahmed's experience as the stranger subject began much earlier in Australia with a policeman asking her: "Are you an Aboriginal?" This hostile address, described on page 3, introduces readers to Ahmed's racialization as the dark stranger out of place in a city of whiteness. No longer can Ahmed innocently wander the city. No longer can we read the address innocently. Gradually and perhaps painfully, a reader may come to understand why subjects of 'stranger' categories seek relief from whiteness.

Ahmed argues that diversity workers must create problems. This book is about creating problems. It problematizes diversity's apparent challenge to institutional whiteness. It demonstrates that whiteness is reproduced even at the moment when a university invites diversity in. People of colour become guests in a white institution, overwhelmed by whiteness and histories of whiteness. The universities' conditional hospitality allows an act of inclusion to maintain the form of exclusion. The book problematizes the elimination of racist individuals from an institution, because this act can support the illusion of eliminating an institution's systemic racism. The book problematizes the recognition of institutional racism, because it can support racist individuals' denial of responsibility for their racist acts. Even when an institution has confessed to racism and is seen as on its way to recovery (getting over its racism), the illusion of eliminating racism can hide racist practices behind a veneer of respectable differences. When diversity is present, it can become the sign of inclusion masking signs of exclusion. The book also problematizes the appointment of diversity officers, because it can represent a wider absence of support for diversity. Even the distribution of a diversity document can become a means of not doing diversity. The book problematizes the implementation of diversity in university policy when it becomes more about challenging perceptions of a university's whiteness than about challenging the actual reproduction of this whiteness. A university community may derive pleasure from the integration of respectable subject categories – like a menu of exotic dishes – diverting attention from the ethical task of challenging the community's illusion of equality. Diversity can become a way of reproducing advantages rather than tackling disadvantages. Ahmed presents an exhaustive, exhausting set of problems with diversity.

Diversity workers are visualized inhabiting the gap between what organizations say they do and what they actually do. Their voices are heard throughout the book. They suggest that diversity is more easily incorporated – than equality – into policy because it can be detached from scary issues, and therefore circulate more but do less. The workers describe how diversity policy creates an identifiable community through its circulation. They explain how diversity's open associations can work for an institution's business model and its social practice, so the trick is developing methods for switching between representing the business model and the social practice in order to address inequality. Diversity workers are tactical workers. They can use diversity data to challenge reductionism, the means by which diversity is reduced to data. They can turn diversity into a question in order to problematize systemic practices of inequity. They can use institutional statements of commitment to get things done about inequality. They can reattach meanings to the empty signifier of diversity by ensuring that diversity implications are discussed for every decision taken by university committees.

On Being Included reminds us that racism and sexism are structural, not incidental, so we can learn how to stop reproducing them as an everyday background feature of institutional life. The book reminds us that exclusionary practices are reproduced through a process of disregard that relies on not seeing and not hearing the practices that are like impenetrable walls to those excluded. Diversity work, Ahmed argues, is the practical refusal to overlook the walls – to disregard the wall – that excluded people are still running into. It is the acquiring of critical orientation to an institution in the process of running up against it, not the ticking of boxes at the site of diverse bodies. Practically, diversity work is the countering of restrictions encountered after responding 'yes' – despite the risk – to a highly repetitive question: will you cause a problem by raising a problem? Diversity work, according to Ahmed, is about constraining the fantasy of a university's flow to diversity by pointing out its many blockages, by making the unseen walls of everyday exclusion obvious.

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References

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