

Book Review:

On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

Sara Ahmed

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This is a book for those who wish to probe into the contradictions and dilemmas that shape how universities and other contemporary institutions do policy (or not). By focusing on text and interviews with diversity officers from 21 universities in Australia and the United Kingdom during 2003, 2004 and 2009, Ahmed offers important ethnographic insights into how contemporary universities enact institutional ideologies within an audit culture. She uses a feminist and critical race theory framework, which challenged this reviewer in a variety of ways and ultimately offered thoughtful comment on the leadership challenge of contemporary universities. This contribution builds upon a substantial body of Ahmed's (2004) previous work in feminist, post-colonial and queer studies and focuses on her experience of institutions, as well as her time advancing equity and diversity policy within a university.

On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life digs into the social complexity of the contemporary university, while drawing upon an extensive variety of influences (i.e., Butler, Bannerji, Derrida, Fanon, Husserl, Lyotard, Mohanty). Those who may find conceptual contentment within a structural-functionalist understanding of universities are unlikely to appreciate this work. This book offers insight into why universities are increasingly concerned with other universities and how it became important for the contemporary university, whether in the UK, Australia, or Canada, to expend increasing amounts of time and resources on self-representation.

Many conversations within *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* are original, noteworthy, and reason enough to spend time with this offering. Each of the following points stand out, as they illustrate the tricky social terrain in which universities must operate: (1) discursive text and the language of diversity; (2) commitment within audit culture; and (3) *excellence* as a heraldic and hegemonic device of university leadership. Ahmed focuses on text as a methodological consideration and in doing so asks the reader to consider whether or not the contemporary university is a reified and unitary subject. She differentiates between a textually produced reality of the university and a second reality constituted in the lived experience of individuals within it. This is a method that has been used elsewhere with great impact, such as Rankin's (2004) institutional ethnography of the nursing profession, where she explores the replacement of individual patients with discursively produced entities that exist in the text-based hyper-reality of healthcare information systems and institutions. Ahmed asks how we can know anything about what takes place within the contemporary university and

responds with a methodology that focuses on texts and human experience as expressed through interview. This point of epistemic-entry is important. Universities are decentralized institutions that suffer from litigious internal constituencies and institutional peers that cultivate support from the same funding sources, which can make them particularly difficult to study.

Ahmed explores how *diversity* performs as discourse and quotes Himani Bannerji's observation that diversity can be used as a policy mechanism to accommodate conflicting heterogeneity. For example, European universities increasingly use rhetorical devices and discursive texts, such as origin myths and mission statements, to bring together constituencies that may have incommensurable positions on questions of history, who they are, and where they are going (Stier, 2004; Stier & Börjesson, 2010). Kreber and Mhina (2005) illustrated the importance of performing discourse on websites as a risk mitigation strategy at Canadian postsecondary institutions. When the contemporary university is represented as the unitary (corporate) subject, it is worth remembering that historically produced conflict and tribalism of various types continue beneath the surface of that representation. Ahmed explores the deployment of diversity discourse in a variety of uses and formations (e.g., official, value-based), which are at times conflicting. This concept of diversity as shell permits the institutional discourse of diversity to maintain a consistent external shape; a shape conveying conceptually isomorphic properties, even while it is mobilized to advance multiple and possibly incompatible agendas (Urciuoli, 2010). One outcome of this ongoing intertextuality is the production of a dominant ideology or institutional ideology about diversity that is expressed as an institutional discourse in key documents.

After considering the problems inherent within the language of diversity, Ahmed asks how commitment to diversity can exist in statements without resources or follow-up actions. A statement itself is necessary and serves as a reference point when comparing individual actions to the principle expressed, and it can also be a support guiding institutional direction and courses of action. However, Ahmed cautions that a statement of diversity can also become a trap, where the text of the statement becomes evidence of *performativity* (Ball, 2006). Ahmed observes the policy statement may hinder advancement on issues of equity, race, and diversity if it is used as a signal to indicate they have already been dealt with and the statement instead becomes a piece of shiny armour representing the institution within ordinal ranking schemes. The armour acts to protect the institution from criticism but it also constricts the behaviour of the institution to comparison-safe mimetic policy, or what Martens (2007) called *governance by comparison*. In an audit culture, the diversity statement becomes the performance, meaning no other resource or effort needs be allocated because the statement is there for all to see. Kudos to Ahmed for relating the story about the officer whose diversity statement was rated poorly and was envied by other diversity officers because where the diversity statement was rated poorly, the institution then had an impetus to act. A simple statement of principle may change nothing at all on the ground within the university, or worse, in audit culture, there is no telling between those institutions that internalize it as an operational value and those institutions that substitute the statement for action.

Ahmed explores the issue of leadership and pluralism through the notion of a university of excellence (Readings, 1996), where *excellence* is empty of meaning but may be the only banner under which a deeply fragmented institution might unite. She observes that both diversity and excellence can be devoid of meaning and when pointed at one another (i.e., excellence through diversity), they may actually serve to conceal inequity. For a socially complex, decentralized, and fragmented institution such as a contemporary university to unite behind any banner, a

hegemonic leadership toward the banner must (at least temporarily) counter the fragmentation. This is a hegemonic culture of leadership and performativity, where raised issues of inequity, inequality, or racism will be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic force. Individuals, groups, or diversity officers who bring forward issues, discontinuities, and problems with the way their universities are doing things can be seen as *the problem* and quickly marginalized. The hegemonic momentum that greets the individual raising an issue might look something like this: Is this issue (and the one or two people it may affect) more important than the reputation of our university? Although championed in principle, publicly admitting and then doing something about issues of equity or diversity can be seen as a threat to the standing of the institution among its peers.

The discussion above provides a glimpse into Ahmed's latest book and reflects just a little of the rich intellect and enthusiasm with which she writes. There are two further observations about the work that are worth mentioning. First, what was missing for me was a brief list of key agenda items this group of diversity officers would advance had they a full measure of the institutional support that they clearly worked to garner in their respective institutions. Ahmed cites a definition of institutional racism from the Macpherson Report (1999) in the United Kingdom, which is clear and concise. Still, my enjoyment of the work would have been enhanced had there been a compelling statement of what was at stake. I wondered what would be the current problems of highest priority for diversity officers participating in this study. A second observation was that whether intentional, incidental, or mischievous, Ahmed obliges the reader to consider his or her own unique social location (i.e., race, class, and gender) and experience of institutions in relation to it. This is as it should be, but the ongoing use of the term *whiteness* to describe the dominant ideological stance and culture of the university can be a bit jarring. Whiteness was a term explored more fully in Ahmed's *Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism*, where she expressed her own reservations about critical whiteness studies.

Overall, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* is a high level discussion of how and why universities struggle to overcome the constraints of their institutional habitus. Perhaps because of my own complicities, this book challenged me at a personal level. It is an insightful, rigorously theoretical, and grounded conversation about racism and diversity within higher learning and a book for anyone who believes we can do better.

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