On Being Included
Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life
By Sara Ahmed


Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, American employers have written and posted Equal Opportunity statements. Colleges and Universities across the country have participated in this act, and these statements have found their way into nearly all of their public documents. Over the past four decades, many hurdles have been jumped, but the story of the initial policy writing is now largely in university archives. With the passage of the United Kingdom’s Race Relations Amendment Act (RRAA) in 2000, a new wave of universities authored a new era of diversity documents. On Being Included is the story of these documents as told by those on campuses charged with the responsibility of being the “diversity practitioner.” It offers important insights on diversity—or the lack of diversity—in higher education and the work of those in the “gap between what organizations say they do and what they ‘do do’” (141).

This is a deeply personal work for Sara Ahmed, whose insight and reflections come from years of being “the race person” (4). Her own experiences are supported by twenty-one interviews with diversity practitioners in the United Kingdom and Australia who contribute deeply to this phenomenological ethnography of their work and the process of responding to the RRAA and subsequent legislation requiring particular documents from all public sector institutions.

Regardless of setting, diversity can feel like a ubiquitous term. Ahmed suggests that diversity has become the term du jour because of its market appeal. It is approachable and meaningful. However, more important than the origins of the word is the way in which it is mobilized within or-
ganizations. For diversity efforts to succeed, it is critical that diversity becomes an official word—that it is spoken regularly by people of authority in institutions. The word diversity itself is a positive one, but this positivity can simultaneously get people to join the conversation and obscure the reason why people should join the conversation in the first place. Therefore, the way in which diversity is discussed is as critical as the goals of the work. Every audience is different, and the right strategy is the one that works with the audience with whom diversity practitioners are working; the language and the activities will change depending on the audience. But, diversity cannot be relegated to an official space for diversity; it must be a part of “ordinary conversations” (78).

Making diversity part of these conversations is what Ahmed calls institutionalizing diversity. She notes that making diversity an institutional given is particularly complex since diversity workers consistently have the feeling that they are causing trouble; their very existence shows that institutions are not equitable. Rather, what is often institutionalized is whiteness and racism. Institutions matter in the ways in which they support—or do not support—those who fall outside of their norms and the ways in which those individuals are a part of the conversation.

This is a complicated task, and institutions often attempt to determine their own success in these pursuits. To that end, diversity has become “imbedded within performance culture” (85). A symptom of this culture is the ever growing set of organizational documents on diversity. Documents become the unit of measurement, the “something you can point to” when challenged on an issue (90). Documents create a trail, and if used properly, they can also change the way institutions talk about diversity. Documents also create the ability for diversity to be measured in check boxes. What the document does and does not say offers insight into what gets counted and what does not. Recent work on performance based analysis is clear that what gets counted is what gets accomplished, so there can be value to checking boxes. Ahmed argues quite the opposite.

She shows instead that documents create the impression for diversity practitioners that the majority of their work is writing about diversity and not actually implementing it on their campuses and also give room for schools to take credit for work they have not done. Building on John Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, Ahmed offers one of the more important insights of this book—the non-performative statement.1 Institutional statements of commitment take many forms. Ideal statements are sincere, tied to the mission of the institution, reflect what is, and reflect what will be through a commitment to action. Ahmed is suspicious that such a statement actually exists. More likely are aspirational or performative statements. These are also sincere and tied to the mission of the institution, but their commitment is to one of change rather than naming that which is already good. They inspire the performance of an act. However, for Ahmed, the most likely and most dangerous type of statement is the non-performative; that which allows for the avoidance of the performance of any significant change. These are often disconnected from mission, fulfill external requirements, and delay real change. These documents are “a way of repackaging and rearranging the organization so that it puts its best face forward” (107). They are a way to hide much of the reality of what is going on. They are institutions saying something so as not to do anything.
Just as documents allow institutions to avoid taking significant action, Ahmed believes that talk of diversity can do the same. By publicly talking about diversity, institutional leaders have the ability to point to their comments as a sign of commitment instead of having to point to any significant, lasting change. Those who live outside of the majority in a community find themselves regularly understood as a problem to be solved. Discussions of racism are often crafted so that little of substance is addressed, since substantial change is hard. Whether or not diversity talk is used to compensate for actual change, it is important for schools to carefully watch how racism does or does not come up in their own institutional settings.

An important figure in this safeguarding is the institutional diversity practitioner. Since most institutions do not yet truly embody diversity and their official policies on diversity and equality can sometimes hide reality, individuals must remain on campuses fighting for what is right. Regardless of institution or the type of documents they create, the schools and the documents do not work on their own. They are a starting point. Without individuals willing to live out their claims, all documents are hollow. But a single individual cannot a new institution make; if an institution is relying on any one person to complete their change, they are destined to fail.

Ahmed can sometimes avoid the obvious and neglect to define the terms of her observations. Most glaringly, the chapter on racism begins with the assumption that the reader knows what she means when she uses the term. Racism has at least as many possible definitions as diversity, and her lack of clarity leaves this section more open ended than she intends. Moreover, higher education is a unique organizational beast, and Ahmed neglects to offer opportunities to address the differences among those participating within these organizations. Certainly much has been offered elsewhere on issues of diversity, race, and accessibility for students in higher education, but it seems a disservice that students are almost absent from this work. Also, a discussion of the differences between faculty and staff diversity issues are largely blurred. Perhaps, as most any Program Director or Department Chair can understand, Ahmed works within these blurred lines as a “diversity practitioner;” both faculty and staff, yet fully neither. Recognizing this is a work focused on the experiences of those doing diversity work, the focus is rightly elsewhere, but an opportunity was lost nonetheless.

At times a dense scholarly journey through cultural, feminist, and organizational theory and at times casual and conversational, Ahmed attempts to delicately balance a line between being inviting and informative. She also tries to balance the line between what reads as pessimism developed from a lifetime of coming up against walls and hopefulness that diversity workers are making great strides in their work. Ultimately, her imperative is that all involved with higher education will continue to ask what we are doing with diversity and stop trying to use diversity itself as a simple solution.

Diversity is important and unique; however, so is a dedication to the liberal arts, a liberal education, and preserving academic freedom. In an era of increased performance metrics and outcomes-based funding at the state level and institutional pressure on departments and units to
show merit and value, careful attention must be paid to the difference between what is said and what is done.

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