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

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"Ahmed's quick pace in On Being Included left me wanting more. Any one of her sections of chapters or themes--such as the link between diversity and global images of the university, the fluidity of the wall, the uses of anger--could be stand-alone chapters."

Sara Ahmed's latest book offers a fascinating study of what diversity work does and does not do in institutions of higher learning. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* shows both how diversity practitioners in universities have the potential to create institutional change and how such work conceals and reinforces a racist status quo. This book performs an ever-thicker analysis of problems of diversity work and is accessible to readers across disciplines and outside of academia. Although this book does not explicitly consider gender, Ahmed describes it as "a set of feminist reflections on the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of institutional power" (13).

As a text dependent on qualitative data, *On Being Included* is a departure from Ahmed's earlier work. Here she builds her arguments from twenty-one interviews she conducted with diversity practitioners employed at institutions of higher learning. These interviews were conducted in Australia and the United Kingdom; however, because of the way that Ahmed uses her data, there is no comparison between universities, and one never has a clear picture of any particular institution. In service to Ahmed's depiction of themes common to universities, the names of interviewers and institutions all appear as "xxx," which causes the qualitative data to take on a generalized aura.

Ahmed frames her approach to diversity work as a product of her interest in phenomenology and her "concern with what recedes from general view" (14). Drawing on J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975), Ahmed pairs this concern with what recedes with an account of the difference

between what diversity work does and what it says it does. She explores these two overlapping concerns (what recedes and the tension between saying and doing) in terms of diversity practitioners' strategic pursuits of their goals, institutional commitments to diversity, and the institutional language surrounding diversity.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on diversity practitioners' accounts of their roles in institutional life and of their strategies for fighting inequality and racism in the face of institutional pressures. In chapter 1, Ahmed offers an examination of the conditional hospitality of the university. She points out that if diversity is (problematically) about bringing color to a university, then it must be that whiteness is what the university is already organized around. Furthermore, this organization around whiteness is not an accident, but is the product of work made habitual and invisible to those who are already at home in the institution. In this way the organization of the university exists prior to its inclusion of diverse others, and the goal of diversity must be in service to the original (and historically white), nondiverse goals of the university. It is at this point that Ahmed introduces the trope of a brick wall in order to describe the problems that diversity workers have with institutional resistance to diversity. She writes, "The wall gives physical form to what a number of practitioners describe as 'institutional inertia,' the lack of an institutional will to change" (26). This wall, which diversity workers bang their heads against, remains largely unseen by those whose privilege means that the wall never stands in their path. From this Ahmed concludes that diversity practitioners have the particular experience of working against and with institutions, attempting to cajole them into change.

Chapter 2 builds on the insights of chapter 1, and considers the ways that diversity is used as a marketing buzzword and a term that cajoles institutions. Ahmed argues that in academic institutions diversity is seen as a pleasing term associated with both moral and aesthetic value. She then contrasts the assumptions surrounding the word *diversity* with those surrounding *equality*, explaining that equality has become a bad term associated with the law, whereas diversity provides a motive for action as a feel-good term. As she notes, "Those who enjoy diversity have good taste. But if diversity is digestible difference, then other forms of difference become indigestible, as that which the organizational body cannot stomach" (70). Thus diversity is both a tool for change insofar as it is available to diversity practitioners as a way to motivate institutions, but is negative insofar as what it introduces must be palatable to said institutions.

In chapter 3, Ahmed shifts her attention from diversity workers' strategies to the work of diversity documents. She considers the way that circulating official documents on equality and diversity may stand in for other kinds of doing and conceal the continuation of the problems of institutional racism. As she argues, the danger here is twofold. First, institutional action creates its own metrics for diversity and thus such metrics may serve the already established (and thus nondiverse) university agenda. Second, through codification diversity becomes another box to check, emptying diversity of meaning as the goal becomes the checked box and not diversity itself. She explains that "if the success of the document is presumed to reside in how much it is passed around, this success might 'work' by concealing the failure of that document to do anything" (97). This tension between the work of a diversity document and diversity work is further developed in the next chapter.

In chapter 4, Ahmed really hits her stride. In this chapter she explores "how acts of commitment can be made in situations where commitment is not given in the sense of being bound" (114). Building on the earlier examination of documents intended to foster equality, she explores the way that institutions commit themselves to these documents and to diversity. The power of a university's statement of commitment to diversity cuts two ways. On the one hand, if a university has a public document that states that it is committed to diversity, then such a document can be used as proof that there is no inequality or racism at a university. On the other hand, such commitments can be tools for diversity practitioners to hold an institution accountable to its own failure to live up to its commitment. Because statements of commitment do not actually guarantee commitments, they are what Ahmed terms *non-performatives*. These statements do not bring about commitments but require others to try to close the gap between the statement and the reality.

According to Ahmed, this gap exists partly because these documents will in some ways go against commitments the institution has already habituated. She explains that one of the ways that diversity commitments are affirmed and committed to, in spite of already established habits, is through the special advocacy of individuals at the top of an administration. However, the danger is that when a champion leaves, is promoted, or becomes too busy, the issue championed is left without adequate force. Thus commitment depends upon exceptional figures, and is limited by the habits already in place in the chain of command, making systemic change improbable.

 If in chapter 4 Ahmed hits her stride, in chapter 5 she brings it home. Here she asserts that, "Solutions to problems are the problems given new form" (143). She makes this claim in relation to the way that accusations of racism often cause the accuser to be ostracized and delegitimized. Diversity programs affirm this dynamic of blaming the accuser insofar as an institution's commitment to diversity is often held up as proof that it is not racist and therefore no racism can be experienced. As Ahmed explains, "Statements such as 'we don't have a problem with racism' make those who report racism into the problem" (145). Similarly, diversity committees (usually made up of people identified as "diverse") become proof of diversity in an institution. In this way the university's construction of a committee on diversity becomes evidence of the university's antiracism. She notes, "The permission thus becomes probation: racism becomes something that we should not speak about, given that we have been given the freedom to speak it" (154). This freedom to speak, something that did not exist before (does it really exist now?), is an attempt to move beyond a broken, racist history but can become a proof that racism is no longer an institutional issue. This, Ahmed suggests, leads to an implicit assumption that if those who have been discriminated against would simply get over these past acts, then racism itself would disappear.

As a refutation to the idea that past acts of racism can or should simply be forgotten, Ahmed ends chapter 5 by turning to Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Lorde 1982). Invoking Lorde's invitation to use anger and to draw on its creative force, Ahmed writes, "Anger can open up the world. . . . [I]f anger is creative, then it gives us room to do other things" (171). This it seems is the point: the walls are already there, so to ignore them and one's anger at them will not get rid of the injustice.

In her conclusion Ahmed again returns to the trope of the wall. She explains that those who go with the flow do not see the wall because it does not block them. Only those who are already positioned against the flow run up against the blockages. The blockages are already there and the goal of diversity practitioners must be to point out these blockages by becoming a blockage to the habitual flow. Thus the point is not to get over racism, or the wall; instead, the point may be to understand that what may seem fluid from one perspective is really the continual rebuilding of a wall that promotes racial privilege and that diverse others continually run up against.

Ahmed's quick pace in *On Being Included* left me wanting more. Any one of her sections of chapters or themes--such as the link between diversity and global images of the university, the fluidity of the wall, the uses of anger--could be stand-alone chapters. It is not that her argument necessarily suffers from omission, just that this reader wants to hear more, but I continually ran into the walls that form the ends of each section and chapter. Ahmed seems to acknowledge this unfulfilled desire for more by including a two-page brick wall that separates the end of the text from her textual notes. This wall serves a double purpose. First, it serves as a reminder of the limitations of a conclusion insofar as conclusions imply that the work of the text has already been done, so this wall warns against the conclusion that diversity and racism have now been accounted for once and for all. Second, this picture of a wall serves as a call for others to use Ahmed's account of institutional walls and diversity work as a platform for further investigation.

Ahmed's investigation into institutional treatments of diversity and the work of diversity practitioners makes for a stimulating read. Although I would highly recommend this book, I was a bit disappointed by Ahmed's lack of engagement with what her own text means for diversity work. Given her claims regarding the significance of what recedes and of nonperformative gaps, I am left with two questions: what does this text conceal in its own exposure of diversity work, and in what ways is this text doing something different from what it says? Despite these questions, Ahmed's account of diversity and racism certainly are valuable for feminist race theory, particularly feminist analysis of the way that institutions manage difference. *On*

Being Included offers insight to those who are not versed in the particular problems of white hegemony in academic politics, and it offers validation to those who work on and/or are confronted by diversity issues.

References

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