

The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism

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In this paper I want to explore two related concepts. First, I reflect upon what I call the ‘politics of admission’, where institutions as well as individuals ‘admit’ to forms of bad practice, and where such ‘admissions’ are valued as a form of good practice. In particular, I will examine speech acts that admit to racism where the ‘admission’ itself is read as a form of anti-racism. My argument is simple: such speech acts are not performative.¹ I use performative in Austin’s (1975) sense as referring to a particular class of speech. An utterance is performative when it does what it says: ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’ (1975: 6). I will argue that admitting to one’s own racism does not do what it says. Such admissions are not anti-racist actions, and nor do they commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist.

Second, I want to suggest that the non-performativity of anti-racist speech acts requires a new approach to the relation between texts and social action, which I will be calling ‘an ethnography of texts’. Such an approach still considers texts as actions, in that they ‘do things’, but suggests that ‘texts’ are not ‘finished’ as forms of action, as what they ‘do’ depends on how they are ‘taken up’. To track what texts do, *we need to follow them around*. My argument will show how the textual and the empirical cannot be separated, but are weaved together in the fabric of the social. Rather than reading texts for ‘what’ they say, I suggest that texts circulate as documents or objects within public culture, and that our task is to follow them, to see how they move, as well as how they get stuck in specific contexts of utterance.

The Politics of Admission

So what do I mean by the politics of admission? We can begin by thinking through the concept of institutional racism and the paradoxes that follow when the language of institutional racism becomes part of institutional language. Take for instance the Macpherson Report (1999) into the police handling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The Macpherson report is an important document insofar as it recognises the police force as ‘institutionally racist’. What does this recognition do? A politics of recognition is also about definition: if we recognise something such as racism, then we also offer a definition of that which we recognise. In this sense, recognition produces rather than simply finds its object; recognition delineates the boundaries of what it recognises as given. As other social commentators have pointed out, the Macpherson report not only involved definitions of what is a racist incident (Chahal 1999), but also in defining the police as institutionally racist offered a definition, albeit hazy, of institutional racism (Solomon 1999). To quote from the report, institutional racism amounts to: ‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people’.

The language of institutional racism of course was not, of course, invented by the report. The push to see racism as institutional and structural comes out of anti-racist and Black politics: it is a direct critique of the idea that racism is psychological, or that is simply about bad individuals. In this report, the definition of an institution as being racist does involve recognition of the ‘collective’ rather than individual nature of racism. *But it also forecloses what is meant by ‘collective’ and institutional by seeing evidence of that collectivity only in what institutions fail to do*. In other words, the report defines

¹ I should note here that in my view ‘performativity’ has become rather banal and over-used within academic writing; it seems as if almost everything is performative, where performative is used as a way of indicating that something is ‘brought into existence’ through speech, representation, writing, law, practice, or discourse. My paper involves an implicit critique of this ‘banalisation’ of the performative. I would also suggest that the logic that speech ‘brings things into existence’ (as a form for positive action) only goes so far, and indeed the claim that saying is doing can bypass that ways in which saying is not sufficient for action, *and can even be a substitute for action*. I am not in saying this rejecting the concept of the performative, or the work of theorists such as Judith Butler who use this concept to explore the relationship between repetition and the generation of objects of discourse. Such work is exemplary, and I remain indebted to it. I am suggesting only that it is important to retain the concept of the performative as referring only to some kinds of speech, *and not to others*.

institutional racism in such a way that racism is *not seen* as an ongoing series of actions that shape institutions, in the sense of the norms that get reproduced or 'posited' over time. We might wish to 'see' racism as a form of doing or even a field of positive action, rather than as a form of inaction. For instance, we might wish to examine how institutions become white through the positing of some bodies rather than others as the subjects of the institution (who the institution is shaped for, and who it is shaped by). Racism would not be evident in what 'we' fail to do, but what 'we' have already done, whereby the 'we' is an effect of the doing. The recognition of institutional racism within the Macpherson report reproduces the whiteness of institutions by seeing racism simply as the failure 'to provide' for non-white others 'because' of a difference that is somehow 'theirs'.

We might notice as well that the psychological language creeps into the definition: 'processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping'. In a way, the institution becomes recognised as racist only through being posited as *like an individual*, as someone who *suffers* from prejudice, but who could be treated, so that they would act better towards racial others. To say 'we are racist' is here translated into the statement it seeks to replace, 'I am racist', where 'our racism' is describable as bad practice that can be changed through learning more tolerant attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, if the institution becomes like the individual, then one suspects that the institution also *takes the place of individuals*: it is the institution that is the bad person, rather than this person or that person. In other words, the transformation of the collective into an individual (a collective without individuals) might allow individual actors to refuse responsibility for collective forms of racism.

But there is more to say about how institutional racism becomes an institutional admission. I am uneasy about what it means for a subject or institution to posit itself as being racist. If racism is shaped by actions that don't get seen by those who are its beneficiaries, what does it mean for those beneficiaries to see it? We could suppose that the admission restricts racism to what we can see: after all the definition also claims that racism 'can be seen or detected' in certain forms of behaviour. But I would suggest the admission might work both by claiming to see racism (in what the institution fails to do) *and* by maintaining the definition of racism as unseeing. If racism is defined as unwitting and collective prejudice, then the claim to be racist by being able to see racism in this or that form of practice is also a claim not to be racist in the same way. The paradoxes of admitting to one's own racism are clear: saying 'we are racist' becomes a claim to have overcome the conditions (unseen racism) that require the speech act in the first place. The logic goes: we say, 'we are racist', and insofar as we can admit to being racist (and racists are unwitting), then we show that 'we are not racist', or at least that we are not racist *in the same way*.

To admit to being racist, or as having been racist in the past, often involves a cultural politics of emotion: we might feel bad for one's racism, a feeling bad that 'shows' we are doing something about 'it'. But what does declaring one's bad feeling do? We could ask what it means to declare one's shame for being or having been implicated in racism, which may or may not take the form of shame about being white. In Australia, the demand for recognition of racism towards Indigenous Australians, and for reconciliation, takes the form of the demand for the nation to express its shame (Gaita 2000a: 278, Gaita 2000b: 87-93). The preface to *Bringing them Home* involves such a declaration of national shame. This document weaves together testimonies from Indigenous Australians about their experiences as members of the Stolen Generation, a generation who were taken away from their families and communities as part of a violent policy of assimilation. The Governor General opens his preface with the following comment:

It should, I think, be apparent to all well-meaning people that true reconciliation between the Australian nation and its indigenous peoples is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgement by the nation of the wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression and degradation of the Aboriginal peoples. That is not to say that individual Australians who had no part in what was done in the past should feel or acknowledge personal guilt. It is simply to assert our identity as a nation and the basic fact that national shame, as well as national pride, can and should exist in relation to past acts and omissions, at least when done or made in the name of the community or with the authority of government. (Governor-General of Australia, *Bringing them Home*, 1996)

In this quote, the nation is represented as having a relation of shame to the 'wrongfulness' of the past, although this shame exists alongside, rather than undoing, national pride. The proximity of national shame to indigenous pain may be what offers the promise of reconciliation, a future of 'living together', in which the rifts of the past have been healed. The nation posited here as 'our identity', in admitting the wrongfulness of the past, is moved by the injustices of the past. In the context of Australian politics, the process of being moved by the past seems 'better' than the process of remaining detached from the past, or assuming that the past has 'nothing to do with us'. But the recognition of shame – or shame as a form of recognition – comes with conditions and limits. In this first instance, it is unclear 'who' feels shame. The quote explicitly replaces 'individual guilt' with 'national shame' and hence detaches the recognition of wrong doing from individuals, 'who had no part in what was done'. This history is not personal, it implies. Of course, for the indigenous testifiers, the stories are personal. We must remember here that the personal is unequally distributed, falling as a requirement or even burden on some and not others. Some individuals tell their stories, indeed they have to do so, again and again, *given* this failure to hear (see Nicoll 2002: 28), whilst others disappear under the cloak of national shame.

Indeed, white people might only appear within the document as 'well meaning people', people who would identify with the nation in its expression of shame. Those who witness the past injustice through feeling 'national shame' are aligned with each other as 'well meaning individuals'; if you feel shame, then you mean well. Shame 'makes' the nation in the witnessing of past injustice, a witnessing that involves feeling shame, as it exposes the failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. But this exposure is temporary, and becomes the ground for a narrative of national recovery. *By witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can 'live up to' the ideals that secure its identity or being in the present.* In other words, our shame shows that *we mean well*. The transference of bad feeling to the subject in this admission of shame is only temporary, as the 'transference' gets taken as evidence of the restoration of an identity of which we can be proud.

National shame can be a mechanism for reconciliation as self-reconciliation, in which the 'wrong' that is committed provides the very grounds for re-claiming national identity. It is the declaration of shame that allows us 'to assert our identity as a nation'. Recognition works to restore the nation or reconcile the nation to itself by 'coming to terms with' its own past in the expression of 'bad feeling'. But in allowing us to feel bad, shame also allows the nation to *feel better or even to feel good*. This conversion of shame into pride also shapes the Sorry Books, which have been posted on the web as a virtual form of community building. Sorry Books work as a form of public culture; individual postings are posted, and together form the book. Each posting works as an apology for the violence committed against Indigenous Australians, but they also work as a demand for the government to apologise on behalf of white Australia (for a consideration of the apology as a speech act see Ahmed 2004. All Sorry Book websites accessed 13/12/2002).

Take the following utterance. 'The failure of our representatives in Government to recognise the brutal nature of Australian history compromises the ability of non indigenous Australians to be truly proud of our identity' (<http://users.skynet.be/kola/sorry5.htm>). Here, witnessing the government's shame lack of shame is in itself shaming. The shame at the lack of shame is linked to the desire 'to be truly proud of our country', that is, the desire to be able to identify with a national ideal. The recognition of a brutal history is implicitly constructed as the condition for national pride: if we recognise the brutality of that history through shame, then we can be proud. As another message puts it, 'I am an Australian citizen who is ashamed and saddened by the treatment of the indigenous peoples of this country. This is an issue that cannot be hidden any longer, and will not be healed through tokenism. It is also an issue that will damage future generations of Australians if not openly discussed, admitted, apologised for and grieved. It is time to say sorry. Unless this is supported by the Australian government and the Australian people as a whole I cannot be proud to be an Australian' (<http://users.skynet.be/kola/sorry2.htm>).

Such utterances, whilst calling for recognition of the 'treatment of the indigenous peoples' do not recognise that subjects have unequal claims 'to be an Australian' in the first place. If saying sorry, leads to pride, who gets to be proud? I would suggest that the ideal image of the nation, which is based on some bodies and not others, is sustained through this very conversion of shame to pride. In such declarations of national pride, shame becomes a 'passing phase' in a passage towards being as a nation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the message: 'I am an Australian Citizen who wishes to voice my strong

belief in the need to recognise the shameful aspects of Australia's past --without that how can we celebrate present glories' (<http://users.skynet.be/kola/sorry2.htm>). Here, the recognition of what is shameful in the past – what has failed the national ideal –is what would allow the white nation to be idealised and even celebrated in the present.

Such expressions of national shame are problematic *as they seek within an utterance to finish an action*, by claiming the expression of shame as sufficient for the return to national pride. In other words, such public expressions of shame try to 'finish' the speech act by converting shame to pride: it allows *what is shameful to be passed over in the very enactment of shame*. Admissions of shame can work to re-install the very ideals they seek to contest. They may even assume that the speech act itself can be taken as a sign of transcendence: if we say we are ashamed, even if we say we were racist, then 'this shows' we are not racist, *we show that we mean well*. The presumption that saying is doing – that being sorry means that we have overcome the very thing we are sorry about – hence works to support racism in the present. Indeed, what is done in this speech act, if anything is done, is that the white subject is re-positing as the social ideal.

A paradox is clear. The shameful white subject expresses shame about its racism, and in expressing its shame, it 'shows' that it is not racist: if we are shamed, we mean well. The white subject that is shamed by whiteness is also a white subject that is proud *about* its shame. The very claim to feel bad (about this or that) also involves a self-perception of 'being good'. *Anti-racism may even provide the conditions for a new discourse of white pride*. For instance, in describing the goal of whiteness studies, Kincheloe and Steinberg talk about the 'the necessity of creating a positive, proud, attractive antiracist white identity' (1998: 34). Here, anti-racism becomes an attribute of a white subject, which allows that subject to 'turn' back to itself through pride.

In the face of such a critique of the 'terms' of anti-racism, it might even seem worth asking whether anti-racism is possible. Given that Black politics, in all its varied forms, has worked to challenge the ongoing 'force' of racism to even question whether anti-racism is possible seems misguided and could even be seen as a denial of the historical fact of political agency. Surely the commitment to being against racism has 'done things' and continues to 'do things'. What we might remember is that to be against something is precisely *not* to be in a position of transcendence: to be against something is, after all, to be in an intimate relation with that which one is against. To be anti 'this' or anti 'that' only makes sense if 'this' or 'that' exists. The messy work of 'againstness' might even help remind us that the work of critique does not mean the transcendence of the object of our critique; indeed, critique *might even be dependent on non-transcendence*.

I would suggest that a politics of admission fails precisely because the 'admission' is read as a sign of transcendence: if we admit to something then we are not that thing in the moment of admission. This failure is another was of describing a class of the 'non-performative'. As I stated in my introduction, I am using performativity in Austin's sense as referring to a particular class of speech, where the issuing of the utterance 'is the performing of an action' (1975: 6). In such speech the saying is the doing; it is not that saying something leads to something, but that it does something *at the moment of saying*. It is important to note here that, for Austin, performativity is not a quality of a sign or an utterance; it does not reside within the sign, as if the sign was magical. For an utterance to be performative, *certain conditions have to be met*. When these conditions are met, then the performative is happy. This model introduces a class of 'unhappy performatives': utterances that would 'do something' if the right conditions had been met, but which do not do that thing, as the conditions have not been met.

My concern with the non-performativity of anti-racism has hence been to examine how sayings are not always doings, or to put it more strongly, to show how the investment in saying as if saying was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism. The claims I describe do not operate as simple claims². They have a very specific form: they define racism in a particular way, and then they imply 'I am not' or 'we are not' that. So it is not that such speech acts say 'we are anti-racists' (and saying makes us so); rather they say 'we are this', whilst racism is 'that', so in being 'this' we are not 'that', where 'that' would be racist. So in saying we are racists, then we are not racists, as racists don't know they are

² For a more extended analysis of different claims to the performativity of anti-racism see Ahmed (2004b)

racists; or in expressing shame about racism, then we are not racists, as racists are shameless, and so on. These statements function as *claims to performativity* rather than as performatives. Or we could even say that anti-racist speech in a racist world is an 'unhappy performative': the conditions are not in place that would allow such 'saying' to 'do' what it 'says'.

An Ethnography of Texts

The non-performativity of anti-racism does not mean that we should not consider such speech or texts as actions. Words, whether spoken or written, do things for sure. But what they do is not determined in the moment of the saying or writing, nor is it dependent on the citation of past norms, or other forms of authorisation. Texts also circulate: they move around; they get stuck. Words might get repeated and this repetition might increase or decrease their value depending on how they are received. I want to show you now how my model of the non-performativity of anti-racism has led me to develop a new approach to texts, which I am calling 'an ethnography of texts'. Here, I want to explore the non-performativity of the term 'diversity', which has become a key term in the development of race equality initiatives, especially within the public sector. My research offers an ethnographic approach to this term, asking the question, 'what does diversity do' when it is 'put into action'.³ I pose this question by drawing on data collected between March and June 2004 from eight interviews and one focus group with diversity or equal opportunities practitioners within Australian universities. These practitioners worked at a range of institutions from 'old' (sandstone) to 'newer' universities (Blackmore and Sachs 2003: 142). Interviews were semi-structured, and were designed as a space to facilitate conversation about the word 'diversity' and to invite practitioners to reflect on the kinds of work they do, and do not do, through evoking that term.

For some academics, the turn to 'diversity' and away from 'equality' or 'equal opportunities' within organisations is seen to individuate difference and to conceal structural inequalities (Kandola and Fullerton 1994; Lorbiecki 2001; Kirton and Greene 2000). Within research into Higher Education, the turn to diversity is also viewed critically. The word 'diversity' has been attributed with a problematic genealogy, and as having not only dubious origins, but also uncertain and potentially damaging effects. For Deem and Ozga, the word 'diversity' invokes difference but does not *necessarily* evoke commitment to action or redistributive justice (1997: 33). For Benschop the word does not make the right kind of appeal, in that it does not so powerfully appeal to 'our sense of social justice' (2001: 1166).

For these scholars, amongst others, the institutional preference for the term 'diversity' is a sign of the lack of commitment to change, and might even allow universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities under the banner of difference. I want to investigate the significance of this turn to 'diversity' within higher education without necessarily reading that turn as *symptomatic* of the logic of marketisation, or even as a sign of the failure of institutional commitment to justice and equality. This is

³ My interest in the question, 'what does diversity do?' came in part from working within my own university on a race equality policy as one of two ethnic minority academic members of staff on the team. My previous work has considered the politics of racism and has produced a theoretical vocabulary for understanding how racism operates through othering, for example, by the recognition of other as strangers, as bodies out place, or by seeing others as the origin of bad feeling (Ahmed 2000; Ahmed 2004). The experience of working with equal opportunities officers, and staff from personnel was instructive, and has encouraged me to move in a different direction. It showed me that importance of linking theory and practice through generating a dialogue between academics and equal practitioners. In particular, it encouraged me to reflect on the significance of vocabulary not by seeing words as repositories of meaning, but as enabling different kinds of action within institutions. My involvement in writing a race equality policy was a direct result of the Amendment to the Race Relations Act (2000), which required all public institutions to have a race equality policy and action plan. Such plans are required by law to be made public, which means they are available on university web sites. Some universities responded to this by appointing diversity officers, whilst others extended the portfolios of their existing equal opportunities officers. The Race Relations Amendment Act has hence *generated a considerable amount of documentation*. A key concern becomes: what difference does it make how these policies were written? What role does writing equality and diversity policies have in enabling social change? How do the policies get translated into action? In November 2004, I begin a study in the UK on the impact of the RRAA on universities, which will examine the social life of such public documents, and also the role of 'diversity' as a key term used within them. I will be especially concerned with the question of what it means to be assessed as having institutional competence in race equality (or in writing race equality policies) and the risks of diversity becoming a performance indicator.

not to say that I find such arguments unconvincing. Rather, I want to pose a more open question: when diversity is used within education what kind of work does it do? What effects does it have? Does the repetition of the term give it currency? And if it does, what does it mean for diversity to 'have' currency? Does diversity enable action within institutions, or does it block action, or does it do both simultaneously? We might not know what diversity does in practice *in advance of its circulation within organisations*.

The overwhelming response from practitioners to my question about the 'turn' to diversity was that this term 'arrived' partly as the result of the failure of other terms, especially 'equality', to work. This turn to diversity, in other words, was experienced directly as a turn away from other terms: we immediately get a sense from this 'double turn' of the complicated nature of the emergence of diversity. We could of course attribute the failure of 'equality' to work to the existence of continued inequalities: it is the fact the push for equality has failed that is 'evoked' by the failure of the term. The term 'equality' fails because the institutions have 'failed' to take equality seriously or have failed *to take on the term* as part of an institutional commitment to social change. In particular, practitioners within this sector discussed the historic marginalisation of equal opportunities and affirmative action units, suggesting that universities were not taking such programmes seriously, or that such programmes had 'marginalised themselves' by failing to adapt or respond to changes within the sector. For most of my interviewees, the emergence of a diversity framework enabled them to have a stronger voice within the university, and this re-positioning as 'more central' was generally seen as a positive change in the sense that it opened up the capacity for action. By implication, diversity enabled action *precisely because it does not necessarily get associated with the histories of struggle evoked by more 'marked' terms such as equality and justice*.

The politics of this 'turn' to diversity is complicated and this was evidenced in the ambivalence expressed by some of my interviewees about the 'appealing' nature of term, as well as about the effects of what was called 'equity fatigue'. Take the following quote:

I think it [equity] became a tired term because it was thrown around a lot and I think...well I don't know...because our title is equity and social justice, somebody the other day was saying to me 'oh there's equity fatigue, people are sick of the word equity' ...oh well OK we've gone through equal opportunity, affirmative action – they are sick of equity - now what do we call ourselves?! They are sick of it because we have to keep saying it because they are not doing it. [laughs] You know, you go through that in these sorts of jobs where you go to say something and you can just see people going 'oh here she goes'.

We can see here that the reason for 'tiredness' of the term 'equity' is that it is 'thrown around a lot', that is, that it has been repeatedly used, and may even be over-used. At one level, this seems to locate the failure of the term within the practices of those who have used the term. However, immediately this implication is qualified. The term has to be used, and used repeatedly, *because of the failure to hear that term*, or to respond to the term through appropriate action: 'we have to keep saying it because they are not doing it'. In other words, the repetition of terms is necessary because such terms do not act, or are not finished as forms of action. At the same time, such terms fail to act because they are repeated. The repetition of the term is in a way the repetition of failure: we 'say' the term because it has failed, and it fails because we 'say' it. The circularity of this loop is what produces the tiredness of the term: the term 'slows down', or gets weighed down, by acquiring too much baggage, which produces a kind of gut resistance ('they are sick of it'). Rather than terms acquiring currency through repetition, this implies that the more some terms are repeated over time the more resistance there is to 'hearing' that term.⁴ Indeed, such resistance also involves attributing the term to specific bodies: the practitioner who uses the term 'equity' is not heard precisely as the failure of the term is assigned to her ('oh hear she goes').⁵

In another interview, it was hence suggested that we need to constantly 'switch' terms to be effective 'champions' for social change. In other words, this switching of terms is seen as useful as it stops people blocking the message by assuming they have 'heard it before'. As one practitioner puts it, 'we identify what we think is a winner and go with that. So we didn't want equal opportunity or affirmative

⁴ This bypasses the question of what it would mean to hear the term 'diversity'. I will address this question later on. I am also qualifying my argument about sticky signs in my recent book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2004a), which links the repetition of terms to the accumulation of affective value.

⁵ At this point in the interview, we both laughed: the joke was that we both recognised this position too well, as the position of the feminist speaker, who, *in being heard as a feminist is not heard*.

action or any words that I thought were dead in the water and also I personally think, I've done a bit of PR and I think you are much better off with new terms and if people aren't hearing them because of the way you describe them then I think that's a plus to start with'. The resistance to hearing about inequalities, and the need to act to challenge such inequalities is viewed pragmatically: the resistance which has a 'blocking' effect is itself as sign of inequalities, and diversity work is partly presented as finding ways to 'get through' the resistance, or even use that resistance (such as not hearing) to get the message through. Here, 'not hearing' becomes a 'plus'; it allows the word to acquire new meanings. To some extent, this detachment of the word from a referent *opens up what it can do*.

This 'opening up' of the word diversity, or its detachment from a referent, also poses problem for diversity work. As this practitioner further describes:

because I think diversity again it's a word that nobody actually knows what it means, equity has some basis in being fair, people can understand that even if they misunderstand it, but if you want to start talking about diversity, I find that people say 'well what do you mean by diversity' and so you have people who are talking about valuing diversity and people who are talking about counting, people who look different or...you know it's not...maybe because it's still not a tied down concept. I don't know.

If diversity is not tied down as a concept, or is not even understood as signifying something in particular, there are clearly risks, in the sense that people can then define 'diversity' in a way that may actually block action. In this case, one definition of diversity is evoked, 'counting people who look different', which would block any association between diversity and equality, in the sense that such a definition prevents the exposure of social and educational advantage. If diversity is what 'they have', then social norms are reproduced at the same time as they are concealed from view (the 'we' here is unmarked). The openness of the term also means that the work it does depends on who gets to define the term, and for whom. *Diversity can work in ways that reproduce rather than challenge social privilege*.

In the meeting with members of the Victorian Branch of EOPHEA⁶, the mobility of the term was identified as a problem: one practitioner, for instance, discussed how the term had come to mean 'the diversity of courses', or even the diversity of flora and fauna, within her own university. When confidence in the term 'diversity' is expressed it might best be explained as confidence *in the capacity to ensure the conditions of its use and acceptance*, which involves *restricting* how it is used, as well as *sticking* it to other terms, such as equality and justice. If the success of the term is that it can be 'detached' from histories of struggle for equality, *its success is also paradoxically dependent on being 're-attached' to those very same histories*. We can hence speculate that the success of 'diversity' depends on the extent to which officers can determine the condition of its circulation, by determining 'what sticks'. This success may, in turn, be dependent on the degree to which the university has already committed to or invested in an equality agenda. The success of the term, that is, should not be attributed to the term itself and what it 'can do', or what it 'can do' should not be seen as intrinsic to the term, but as dependent on forms of institutional commitment that are already in place that affect how it gets taken up.

Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that the use of new words is one strategy used by practitioners to avoid what we could describe as the strategic and defensive work of individual and collective fatigue: the tiredness which 'blocks' hearing the message of critique. If tiredness is an effect of repetition, and is also paradoxically what makes such repetition necessary, then one might speculate that 'tired words' are also 'signs' of 'tired bodies', bodies that are exhausted by the necessity of doing this kind of work. As another officer put it, 'those terms had got tired and I think that there's a bit of "if one thing gets tired, looks like you've got tired as well"'. The switch of words has an energising effect for practitioners; it gives them not only a new vocabulary, but also a new space, or even a new body that can be inhabited within the organisation.

If one of the most repeated views was that diversity works to enable action, it is also the case that practitioners used the term in quite different ways within their institutions: indeed, typically

⁶ The Equal Opportunity Practitioner's Association in Higher Education Australasia. I used the web site of this organisation to contact the individuals and units involved in this study. See <http://www.eophea.anu.edu.au/vision.html> last accessed 22/07/2004.

practitioners described themselves as ‘translators’, as translating ‘diversity’ into different cases for different audiences. Given this, diversity work requires knowledge about the different audiences or groups within the university to find out ‘what works’: ‘...its whatever works if a person can only hear that case – give them their language they can hear...some people its compassion, sometimes its pragmatic, sometimes its fear, sometime its...its whatever is going to be the appropriate handle for that type of person’. This practitioner suggested that diversity work requires expertise in psychology, or the ability to make judgements about different types of people, defined in terms of *what they can hear*.

What is interesting to note here is how quite contradictory ‘logics’ are used simultaneously: in other words, the business model and the social justice model are used together, or there is a ‘switching’ between them, which depends on a judgement about which works when, and for whom. The elasticity of the term ‘diversity’, evidenced in how it can accommodate different and even opposing views, might be part of its effectiveness as a tool for enabling change. As one practitioner puts it: ‘It’s actually been a very good word for us because we have been able to throw all sorts of things under that heading. We are making it work for us at the moment but I can’t think of any particular problems’.

In most cases, practitioners seem to work ‘with’ the term diversity by attaching the term to the other terms that are valued by the universities in which they work. That is, they make diversity appealing by associating the term with the ideal image the university has of itself, that is, what it imagines as its primary mission or its core values as an organisation. Diversity practitioners are good readers not only of what might appeal to different individuals within the university, but also of the ‘character’ of the university: their ability to get the university to commit to diversity and equality initiatives depends on reading the university’s ideal image of itself.⁷ Clearly, some ideal images for universities are historically more associated with diversity than others: for newer universities, the ideal image might even be ‘about diversity, in the sense that they may see themselves as ‘diversity led’ organisations, *and this could even be their marketing appeal*. But the effects of such ‘diversity pride’ seem to be uneven. One practitioner, who describes her university as ‘a university that tends to pride itself on its equity credentials’, suggests that ‘sometimes they are not acted on as well as they should be’. By implication, ‘being diverse’ does not necessarily translate into ‘doing diversity’.

Furthermore, if the university has an ideal-image as ‘being diverse’, then this can block action and might even justify a refusal to commit to diversity initiatives. As another practitioner puts it: ‘so people see us as being an equity university *but that doesn’t mean that we actually do anything*, so we don’t actually have a lot of programs in place, we don’t actually have strategies in place to recruit students from low socio-economic backgrounds like most universities have to because we don’t have to do anything’ (2). Here, being seen as ‘being diverse’ leads to the failure to commit to ‘doing diversity’, as the organisation says it ‘is it’, or even that it already ‘does it’, which means it sees that there is nothing to do.⁸

In such cases, diversity work requires that diversity officers *challenge rather than appeal to the ideal image the university has of itself*. In other words, for ‘diversity proud’ organisations the task might be to expose the institutional failure to fulfil the conditions of such pride, a failure that can be re-described in the economic language of ‘cost/benefit’ even if it is not reducible to such terms. Indeed, the language of cost is used in different ways: practitioners, when they make the case for diversity on the grounds of compliance, often talk about *the costs of not making a commitment to diversity*.⁹ The costs might be economic, but they also evoke the ideal image of the university as the indirect costs of ‘looking bad’ to external as well as internal others. One officer hence uses data to exposure to the University how it is failing its ‘strong ethos in terms of promoting the notion of being a socially just university’, through which she makes clear that ‘it actually *can’t afford* not to move into a leadership role in those areas’.

For ‘research led’ sandstone universities, the appeal for diversity has to be made on very different terms: partly as the ideal images of such universities are often based on precisely ‘not being’ diversity

⁷ For a theoretical account of how collectives are formed through a shared orientation towards an ‘ideal image’ see chapter 5 of *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2004).

⁸ A similar issue was raised by a number of interviewees regarding the self-image of academics. Because academics tend to see themselves as good and tolerant people, they also tend to see themselves as not needing to be trained in diversity. In other words, a ‘self-image’ as ‘being good’ can block action.

⁹ One university in the UK expressed this logic, when a strategic group that met to discuss widening participation was asked to respond to the following question: ‘can the university afford to be out of line with government policy’.

led, in the sense of not being orientated towards opening up the university to socially disadvantaged groups. In other words, *the appeal of such universities is that they 'embody' social advantage*, or even that they are a social elite. But, practitioners also found ways in which diversity can be attached to social advantage, and they have done this through using the language of globalisation, or internationalism. As one practitioner puts it:

being a global university obviously we have to be good diversity people or we might shoot ourselves in the foot marketing wise.... being financially successful as a global university is being able to deal with (for the want of a better word) variety of people, so if you are going to go global you have to be able to engage with global citizens, some of them are like us and some of them aren't (4).

The term 'diversity' gets stuck to the ideal-image of the university as 'being global'. Importantly, diversity becomes a means by which certain others, who are 'global citizens', can be appealed to: it is about a variety of people, but a variety that takes some forms and not others. The discourse of global citizenship is indeed useful: for it associates diversity work with the skills of translating across cultures, and between differences: this new population is elite precisely 'because' it can speak to diverse people.¹⁰ Diversity here is not associated with challenging disadvantage, but becomes *another way of 'doing advantage'* within the context of globalisation.

We can see from these examples how 'diversity' is made appealing through being made into cases. Such cases are pragmatic in orientation, and they work to associate the word 'diversity' with the ideal image the university has of itself, or to show the costs of not committing to diversity, *as a breach of this image*. Within all my interviews, a key concern expressed was how to make diversity not only a core value alongside other academic values (such as excellence), but also how to get the university to 'commit' itself to diversity. Commitment itself might only be available as 'signs', which are also 'effects'. How do we know a university is committed to something? At one level, we can tell levels or degrees of commitment *through what universities do*, and how they allocate resources. The distinction between 'valuing diversity' and 'commitment' is made partly as a recognition that organisations, including universities, have a tendency 'to say' that diversity is a key value (and may even 'brand' themselves through this term), but that the 'saying' does not always 'lead' to 'doing'. This would be a 'lip service' model of 'valuing diversity', in which the claim to be diverse, or to aspire to diversity, *gives value to the organisation*, but where that claim is not followed through by action or by the appropriate re-allocation of resources.¹¹ Or, to return to my previous argument, we could say that diversity is not performative: saying is not doing, and indeed saying may even function as a *substitute for action*.

To make a simple point, organisations involve the organisation of commitment. When diversity officers evoke commitment they often describe it as something individual's have: the most common term used for individuals with a commitment to diversity is 'diversity champions'. These are the senior people within the University who are prepared to stand up for diversity and indeed become 'diversity people' who are 'heard' in these terms. Commitment becomes a way of describing the 'emotional' work of diversity: such people who are committed to diversity in the sense that there are people who really care about achieving social equality, and who express this care by how they distribute their own time and energy within the organisation. A common theme within my interviews was *how to translate such individual commitment into collective commitment*. One practitioner, for example, talks about how her university's dependence on 'equity champions' sustains the vulnerability of diversity as a framework for action:

I think one of the major problems over the years has been that we have relied very heavily on equity champions throughout the university and in an environment where universities are increasingly becoming very funding conscious, those equity champions are still doing their work but it has slipped on their list of priorities because they legitimately have other very real worries such as the financial survival of the university (5).

¹⁰ See my critique of the discourse of 'the global nomad' in *Strange Encounters* (Ahmed 2000), which associates the ability to translate across difference with privilege. I also argue here that multiculturalism functions as a technique for managing difference, which actually remains predicated on likeness (where diversity becomes 'the common ground').

¹¹ Another example of this 'lip-service' model in universities would be 'interdisciplinarity', which is often 'claimed' as a core value without actually been facilitated at a structural level.

The reliance on senior individuals who champion diversity and equity is here identified as a source of weakness, insofar as the values of equity and diversity are embodied by such people rather than by the university. As such people come and go, or as they can and cannot prioritise these values, then diversity and equality might also 'come and go'. I would also speculate that if such champions have commitment, then the university itself does not have to: the university can 'not' commit to diversity insofar as such champions 'do this work'. The university may even appropriate their commitment 'as its own'.¹² At the same time, without such champions, it is widely regarded that there would be no commitment at all: *the University only has commitment to the extent that individuals within the University commit to diversity*. Of course, at one level 'the university' does not exist as an entity that is 'apart' from its individuals, although 'the university' does become an entity, through decisions that are made over time, which allows it to 'have' a certain character and agency. In the case of diversity, the allocation of diversity to specific bodies and units maybe what allows diversity to be claimed, even when it is not committed to through the meaningful allocation of resources.

We could begin to challenge this impasse if we re-locate 'commitment' from being 'inside' individuals or even collectives and being to think about the *distribution* of commitment, commitment itself becomes a resource that is allocated within the organisation. Now, it is important to stress here that if commitment is distributed, then it is distributed unevenly. Some bodies and units more than others are committed to this work whereby commitment involves a designation of responsibility for that work. In one of my interviews with the director of an 'equity unit', having an autonomous unit is identified as a problem, insofar as it allows other actors within the university not to take responsibility for diversity and equity initiatives. As she put it: 'I think some of them [senior managers] will be aghast that they are responsible for doing anything...you know "I thought the equity and diversity unit did that" and that's one of the big problems when you have a very strong equity and diversity unit then "oh well that's their job"' (5). In other words, having an equity unit can allow the refusal of a more collective sense of responsibility: if the unit does diversity, then it might follow that others within the organisation do not have to do it. The distribution of responsibility for diversity (what I am calling the 'organisation of commitment') is uneven or even involves some 'having' this responsibility, in order that others not only do not have to 'have it', but can actually *give it up*.

The uneven organisation of commitment helps explain the importance of leadership to the politics of diversity and equality. As one practitioner says, 'if the vice president is saying for justice then it stops it being a bad word then doesn't it?' So the circulation of words like 'diversity' has different effects depending on who is saying them. For those who have most authority and power, repeating words like 'diversity', as if they are 'good words', actually allows the word to achieve more currency, and to 'get take up' by others. The commitment of leaders to diversity hence allows such terms *to accumulate affective value*, which in turn accumulates the value of others who use these terms, such as diversity and equity officers.

The importance of the commitment of leaders to diversity is very much about the generation of a public culture, or even *giving diversity a public face*. The commitment of leaders is very much about making signs that are visible and legible to others: having leaders 'show' a commitment (one suspects whether or not they 'have it') is what allows that commitment to spread throughout the organisation. The dynamic named here is interesting: what individuals 'have to say' is dependent upon what gets said by the leaders of the organisation. As another practitioner puts it:

Yes. And I think that again comes back to your original question – how important is it for the senior leadership of an organisation to do those and I can really say that when the senior leadership is in tune, is keyed into a certain set of issues – that filters down the line and people get to know about it, it gets discussed. If they don't value it, people down the line don't value it, or if they do it doesn't translate into organisational culture because there's no where for it to go.

This image of 'filtering' is a useful one: and it also suggests that the circulation of key terms, such as equality and diversity is essential, in the sense that discussion about what these terms can mean can generate a public culture, which takes place around the term 'diversity' within the university. Whether

¹² This happens in a university at which I have worked in the UK, where the university claims it does 'diversity work', especially widening participation through the 'work' that is done by its 'associated colleges'.

or not the leadership shows commitment to diversity, seems to affect 'where' that word can go, or how it gets 'taken up' within the organisation. When leaders do not repeat that term, *then it seems that the term has nowhere to go*. Of course, the circulation of the term 'diversity', which we can describe in terms of 'having somewhere to go' is not the outcome or goal of diversity work: whilst keeping the word 'on the go', or in circulation, may be necessary for diversity work, it does not mean that the word will always work as a technology to expose inequality. Indeed, if diversity acquires currency, it can always work to give value to the organisation: we can see this in the transformation of diversity into a performance indicator, where being good at diversity becomes a skill that allows organisations to increase their own value.

To return to my earlier argument, the success of diversity and equity policies is dependent on *the capacity to determine how such terms circulate within organisations*. For diversity practitioners, this means repeating the word 'diversity' in ways that allow others to hear the 'forgotten' or concealed associations between the word 'diversity' and other words that are marked through the struggle against the reproduction of social and material inequalities, such as 'equality' and 'justice'. Words such as 'diversity' do then enable action, and even social change, but the actions they enable depend on how they get taken up, as well as who takes them up. In other words, the 'take up' of such terms is dependent on institutional histories that maybe forgotten or concealed in the present. Following words like diversity around is useful as it allows us to show the intimacy of 'the textual' and the 'institutional' in the work that such terms do and do not do. Following the term 'diversity' around allows us to identify the conditions in which such terms can act in ways that challenge social and educational advantage, which paradoxically depends on both detaching and re-attaching the term 'diversity' from the other terms that are 'marked' in the struggle against social inequality and injustice.

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Short Biography

Sara Ahmed has recently taken up a new post as Reader in Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College. Her publications include *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998), *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000) and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). She is currently working on two books provisionally entitled, *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology*, and *Doing Diversity: Racism and Educated Subjects*.