



# On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

*Sara Ahmed*

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

What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity? Sara Ahmed offers an account of the diversity world based on interviews with diversity practitioners in higher education, as well as her own experience of doing diversity work. Diversity is an ordinary even unremarkable feature of institutional life. And yet, diversity practitioners often experience institutions as resistant to their work, as captured through their use of the metaphor of the “brick wall.” On Being Included offers an explanation of this apparent paradox. It explores the gap between symbolic commitments to diversity and the experience of those who embody diversity. Commitments to diversity are understood as “non-performatives” that do not bring about what they name. The book provides an account of institutional whiteness and shows how racism can be obscured by the institutionalization of diversity. Diversity is used as evidence that institutions do not have a problem with racism. On Being Included offers a critique of what happens when diversity is offered as a solution. It also shows how diversity workers generate knowledge of institutions in attempting to transform them.

## **On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life Details**

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## **From Reader Review On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life for online ebook**

### **Tanner says**

A very compelling, clinical look at the way diversity work and discussions of racism in the university (U.K. universities, in this case, though very viable for U.S. universities) can either propagate the "flow" of institutional whiteness and solidify it further, or can be an exhausting pursuit which necessarily alienates the pursuer. Rich examinations of rhetoric and institutional identity abound, as well as a hard look at a widespread failure to truly dismantle racism from educational systems (and society at large).

The book is written in a very straightforward way, and though this did make it a bit dry at points, it was very useful for comprehension: Ahmed's logical descriptions/analyses are very deep, but she is careful to avoid synonyms and complex sentence structures.

My only complaint is that the book does not really offer a workable solution to racial inequality. I'm a practical person, and was aching for even a hypothetical set of practices to rewrite our educational practices. Sadly, I think the lack of clear, actionable items arose from the predicament the book itself establishes. Can we face racism without further alienating the discriminated? Can we pursue equality without embedding inequality in our pursuit?

These questions bother me deeply, and I hope some reflection will bring some resolution.

If anything, I took away that we should not stop talking, we should not stop moving, and we should not stop addressing the deep social binds that allow damaging perspectives and practices to reproduce and propagate themselves in the modern academy. To be discouraged and give up is to be a part of the problem.

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### **Mike Mena says**

So many extractable concepts in this book. Top-notch scholarship and absolutely required reading for those interested in institutionality and racialization.

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### **Kendra says**

Ahmed's work is fascinating, and she has turns of phrase (and ideas) that are brilliant. However, sometimes it feels like her literary sensibility can get in the way of clear communication.

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### **Myriam says**

A must read for anyone interested in how racism (and other prejudices) become systematized and institutionalized. Ahmed, a brilliant theorist, utilizes her administrative experience with diversity in higher learning (committee work and internal studies in the UK) to examine how racism, in particular, is maintained in university systems. Particularly insightful in the analysis of the language of diversity utilized in both UK

and US universities (that leads absolutely nowhere, or back to the past). There is a penchant for repetitious phrasing that sometimes adds nothing to the analysis but otherwise a very good read.

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### **Travis Wagner says**

This book does a necessary job of questioning the usefulness of simply talking about diversity and instead asks what this act of talking does to diversity within institutions. It is critical of neoliberal notions of comfort-oriented inclusivity and demands new considerations that reject the task force approach of addressing racism and instead asks for more introspective work on the part of institutions broadly defined. A must read for certain.

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### **Kristy says**

This is an academic (but very readable) look at the act of doing and being diversity in an institutional context. The foundation of Ahmed's book is a series of interviews with diversity professionals at universities in the UK and Australia, as well as her personal experience as a woman of color in the institutions where she's worked. Ahmed doesn't give the reader any easy steps to take, but instead brings us a clear look at how institutions work and what that means for the people or groups who are trying to change an institutional culture that reproduces and favors whiteness.

Much of what she talks about reflects concerns and experiences I've heard from friends and colleagues of color. Other topics shone a light on things I'd never thought about, but that I recognized as an obvious part of the institutional foundations I've experienced. Ahmed's narrative includes looking at the language we use to describe this work (including why "diversity" is such a beloved term), how whiteness as the norm impacts workers and students of color, what actually goes on in committee meetings, the way an institution can be personified, how documents can help and hinder communication, and she ultimately explores some philosophical approaches to thinking through these efforts in a fresh way.

Although there are aspects of the interviews and assertions that are unique to a UK context, most of what Ahmed discusses is just as applicable to institutions in the United States. And while her philosophy and academic background can sometimes make this a dense book, her clear writing style makes it an easy read (and one that made me want to underline every spot-on sentence). I'd really recommend this book for anyone interested in picking apart the successes and failures of institutional diversity efforts (particularly in higher education).

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### **amy says**

This book evokes and unpacks the stifling experience of doing diversity work in institutions of higher education. A major theme is materializing through reference. Examples include 1) how bringing up racism opens one to the charge of invoking/creating it; 2) how diversity / equity / equality policies allow institutions to conflate the creation of documents with the practice of diversity, by referencing the existence of such a document as a credential; and 3) a pattern of repeatedly invoking commitment, as if referring to a person's or institution's commitment to diversity were [enough] to make it a new reality. Ahmed argues that the way institutions handle diversity work merely serves to reinforce and protect the institutional default, which is whiteness. I found the discussion of what it means to "institutionalize" to be especially helpful: normalizing

something to the extent that it becomes background.

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### **Kony says**

Not what I expected, but informative. From the title, I was hoping for a fine-grained narrative account of what it feels like to "belong" (or not) in a university. Instead, this is a theory-driven study of how pro-diversity policies do (and don't) produce changes in institutional behavior. Basically an analytical account of how bureaucracy limits, stifles, and co-opts lofty ideals.

The author opens with a theory of institutions and how they evolve; then she analyzes interview data to explore why the trendy goal of diversity isn't working to produce desired changes in institutional practices. She reveals how happy "diversity discourse" has displaced blunt talk about race/racism, thereby diluting and obscuring the real culture-changing work to be done.

Overall, it's a well-written, but very academic, sociological critique of universities as bureaucracies. Less about inclusion per se, and more about bureaucratic obstacles to creating an inclusive institution.

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### **Monique says**

amazing

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### **Anna says**

We read this as a part of a book discussion group for the library with a campus-wide focus, open to anyone who wanted to join. It gave me a much better framework for what inclusion is and is not.

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### **Elizabeth Schlatter says**

Insightful but hard to read -- I couldn't have gotten through it if I hadn't been part of a book club at work. Ahmed essentially deconstructs the language and activity around diversity initiatives at colleges and universities, through interviews with diversity workers in Australia and England, and through her own experience doing that work as well. Her analysis is fantastic and thorough. My problem (and this is MY problem), is that the book is clearly written for a higher ed context, so there's loads of critical theory that Ahmed references to both buttress her arguments and to put forward her own ideas. Which makes sense -- she's a scholar. But it was tough going for a while. By the last full chapter though, I was "in the flow" so to speak, a little bit like reading Shakespeare, where it takes a while to understand but then when you get used to it, it's relatively fine. Of course, now that I've read this book, I can't be wholeheartedly optimistic about any sort of diversity work -- Ahmed shows that oftentimes the best intentions end up actually making situations worse for the very people that are intended to be helped, based in large part on power inequities and the inability of those with the power to understand how their situation and activities reinforce systemic issues. So ... sigh... that's a bummer... Nonetheless, I'm very glad I read the book.

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## **Carmen Thong says**

Excellent work for what it is - a sort of close reading exercise with a mix of polemic of institutional documents regarding racial equity.

Very well written and moves smoothly from point-to-informative-point, unlike Strange Encounters by the same author which was unnecessarily repetitive and in some parts very redundant. Extremely useful read for anyone vaguely interested in the rhetorics of diversity, and urgently necessary for those who are NOT interested, though of course, that's the problem isn't it.

I'm not giving it a 5 stars more so because I wish Ahmed went further with her analysis. This could have used a lot more documentary material. I get that she started with a vaguely sociological method and had to cease, but she took it halfway in her book without going for the touch down. I can't believe I'm saying this but more examples please! I also wish this had a lot more exposition about the history of words like equal opportunities, affirmative action, inclusion, diversity, etc. Just one chapter - or she could have very explicitly referred the reader to another book with such histories if there is one, but if there isn't, all the more reason to include it!

Very close to 5-star superbness but still very much recommended.

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## **Tatiana says**

Don't look over it, if you can't get over it

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## **Emma says**

This book is not what I assumed it would be -- I was expecting just another book on "diversity" in institutions. Instead, Ahmed is theorizing about and against exactly what I was expecting. Certainly a dense text, but well worth engaging with for anyone inclined toward theoretical scholarship and working within or shaping institutions.

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## **Valyncia Raphael says**

This is a dense, thick read and well worth it. Ahmed is thorough in her explanation of the paradoxical work of diversity workers in higher ed in the UK. It translates well to how CDOs work in the US. The descriptions and solutions are thoughtful, nuanced, and encouraging. If you are looking for keys to doing diversity work well, then this is a must read.

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