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**Sara Ahmed. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 243 pp.
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In the everyday reality of equal opportunities questionnaires, corporate diversity policies, multiculturalism and global migration, Sara Ahmed's 2012 book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* addresses some of the most significant problems that shape contemporary culture and society in the UK. Processes of othering or, as she calls it, 'stranger making' are always at the centre of Ahmed's work. The figure of the stranger, as she points out in her previous book *Strange Encounters* (2000), is not completely unfamiliar. A stranger is someone 'already recognised' as stranger, as someone who does not belong, who is 'out of place' and who is always already too close (2000, 22). Stranger making, she argues further, does not only produce the body of the stranger as stranger, but also the space where some bodies become strangers, while other bodies are at home. 'Some bodies become understood

as the rightful occupants of certain spaces' (2012, 2), she reflects in her present book, while other bodies are intruders, trespassers. Ahmed's latest book examines processes of inclusion/exclusion in institutional settings: how bodies and spaces are regulated in institutional life, or as she puts it 'how some more than others will be at home' (i.e. *not* out of place) 'in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm' (2012, 3).

What prompted the research leading to the writing of the book was a series of changes in the legal regulation of equality in institutions (the Race Relations Amendment Act of 2000, the Equality Act of 2010, amongst others) which together led to what Ahmed calls 'a new equality regime' in the UK (2012, 8). The new legislation 'made race equality into a *positive duty* under law' requiring public institutions to come up with their own race equality policies (2012, 4 (my emphasis)).

Elsewhere, Ahmed describes the figure of the feminist in academia as 'unhappy', killjoy, or spoilsport. The feminist refuses to share the happiness of others, and 'disturbs the fantasy' of happiness (Ahmed 2010). Ahmed's story in the present book offers the 'unhappy' story of diversity politics brought about in the wake of the new legislation. In institutions that celebrate diversity, racism is an 'unhappy word' (2012, 154–155) reserved for the unhappy, who are in turn discredited as the killjoy. Ironically, the celebration of diversity and equality as something already accomplished, Ahmed cleverly points out, is one of the discursive strategies this new regime deploys to maintain/reproduce social inequalities and systemic racial discrimination. Talking about racism in an institution that is already committed to diversity and racial equality becomes a problem, because it threatens to destroy the reputation of that institution and the fantasy that racism is 'over', that it is a thing of the past. Talking about racism is anachronistic, unfashionable and even unpatriotic – the British being modern, enlightened, and as such, anti-racist (2012, 48).

Following the new equality legislation, Ahmed has been appointed as a member of the team at her university writing the institution's race equality policy. While drawing on her own experience, her analysis is based on interviews she conducted with diversity practitioners at other

universities, conference talks and workshops. Defining her method as 'an ethnography of texts' (2012, 12), Ahmed is interested in how the language of diversity gets circulated and embedded in the language of the institution.

The project lends itself to critically thinking through the perceived tension between theory and practice, and to thinking about social activism in general. Drafting documents of race equality, one has to constantly reflect on the ways in which those documents may be applied to the lived experience of social injustice in institutions. This prompts Ahmed, borrowing the terminology of speech act theory, to think strategically about how to 'do things' with those words. Diversity workers work in a 'gap' (2012, 126) between documents and praxis, in between documents, and between the future promise of a commitment to diversity and the present reality of racial discrimination. Ahmed is looking at the possibilities of inhabiting these gaps strategically.

An emphasis on experience is what gives this work a political edge against what has been seen as a dead-end to bringing together theory and practice in post-structuralist thought. Instead of examining questions of agency, Ahmed's phenomenological approach to institutional life examines 'how we inhabit institutions' (2012, 12), our orientations within an institution and towards that institution. Her 'institutional

phenomenology' (2012, 24) brings back the reality of experience, the material effects of institutionalisation, the materiality of bodies and spaces, of texts (documents) and of bodies assembling around tables (committees). She opens with the questions 'What does diversity do?' and 'What are we doing when we use the language of diversity?' (2012, 1), assuming there *are* bodies and spaces, documents and institutions; and that words *do* do things and people *do* do things with words, even though what they do is not always what they claim they do, as she later points out.

This brings us to perhaps the most exciting chapter examining statements of commitment. As she already signals in her introduction, 'the difficulty of equality as a politics' is that often 'policy becomes a substitute for action' because there is 'an investment in both law and policy as "performatives"', that is, a conviction that the words of the law will accomplish that which they name (2012, 10–11). Chapter Four (113–140) discusses statements of commitment in this light. When a commitment to diversity does not entail action, that commitment can be thought of, Ahmed argues, as 'non-performative' because the commitment is made precisely to *not* do what it says. On the contrary, the commitment is used (by way of citation) to relieve someone of the responsibility of taking action, as if action has already been taken in

the form of making the commitment. Ahmed's reversed deconstructive logic runs in a similar fashion throughout the whole book in a very tight, thorough and clear analysis of the discourse of diversity.

However, what I would consider the weakness of the book is that it reduces questions of diversity to race equality, and race equality to colour. Post-colonial theory, feminism, and especially feminists of colour, as Ahmed herself points out, have invented a good portion of vocabulary allowing for radical critical engagement with multiple intersecting structures of domination and subordination (2012, 13). In the meantime, the word 'disability' appears in the index of terminology once, while references to class and age are not listed at all. Discrimination against immigrants from Eastern Europe, which is very much at the centre of political discourse in the UK, somehow falls short of becoming theoretically articulated. There is some reflection on LGBT issues, but mainly in the context of gay imperialism and homonationalism (2012, 148). Similarly, the issue of disability comes up exclusively in connection with arguments where it is deployed to discredit, or draw attention away from, the experience of racial discrimination targeting people of colour (2012, 211, for example). Disability (as well as class), thus, seems to be reduced to the status of discursive strategy at the expense of embodied experience.

While I do not contest the relevance of the point Ahmed makes here, nor do I try to argue for a completely inclusive (happy) theory, it seems to me that under-emphasising forms of discrimination other than discrimination against people of colour puts this particular project in danger for a number of reasons. It reinforces the view that (1) racism, political mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion and questions of equality have a proper context; (2) that the context is the domination of the (white) West over the Third World; (3) and that racism, thus, has a biological – and empirical – basis.

Ahmed talks about how inclusion of the ‘other’ is always *on condition* (2012, 42–3). The person embodying diversity is welcomed by the institution – more specifically, the implicitly white bodies that make up the body of the institution – on the condition that he or she blends in with the image of the institution. You are welcome as a Bangladeshi woman as long as you do not plan to have kids. Similarly, it is okay to be gay as long as you do not sleep around and potentially spread AIDS. However, while some sinners thus gain redemption, the promise of inclusion is addressed to certain bodies and not to others. There are bodies, Ahmed emphasises, which cannot inhabit either diversity or whiteness. Perhaps looking at disability would expose the ‘on condition’ aspect of inclusion and help articulate the point Ahmed makes: you

can be autistic as long as you are a team-player, or depressed as long as you are pro-active. Of course, there is always the possibility of being referred to psychotherapy: work for your happiness, the bottom line goes, because your unhappiness will not be recognised as legitimate.

References

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- Ahmed, Sara. 2010. *Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness*. *Signs* 35 (3): 571–92.