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Sara Ahmed

To cite this article: Sara Ahmed (2007) The language of diversity, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 30:2, 235-256, DOI: [10.1080/01419870601143927](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870601143927)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870601143927>



Published online: 02 Feb 2007.



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The language of diversity

Sara Ahmed

Abstract

This article asks the question, ‘what does diversity do?’ by drawing on interviews with diversity practitioners based in higher education in Australia. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have offered powerful critiques of the language of diversity. This essay aims to contribute to the debate by examining how diversity workers work with the term ‘diversity’ within the context of education. It shows that diversity as a term is used strategically by practitioners as a solution to what has been called ‘equity fatigue’; it is a term that more easily supports existing organizational ideals or even organizational pride. What makes diversity useful also makes it limited: it can become detached from histories of struggle for equality. The article explores how practitioners have to re-attach the word diversity to other words (such as equality and justice), which evoke such histories. Diversity workers aim to get organizations to commit to diversity. However, what that commitment means still depends on how diversity circulates as a term within organizations.

Keywords: Diversity; language; racism; equality; strategies; commitment.

Feminist and postcolonial theorists have been among the most powerful critics of the multicultural language of ‘cultural diversity’ (see, Ang and Stratton 1994; Bhabha 1994; Hage 1998; Gunew 2004; Puwar 2004). Ang and Stratton, for example, offer a close reading of the documents that write the multicultural nation into existence. They show us how multiculturalism posits difference as something ‘others’ bring to the nation, and as something the nation can have through how it accepts, welcomes or integrates such others. This model of cultural diversity reifies difference as something that exists ‘in’ the bodies or culture of others, such that difference becomes a national property: if difference is something ‘they are’, then it is something we ‘can have’.

Scholars in critical management studies and educational studies have also offered powerful critiques of the language of diversity (Kandola and Fullerton 1994; Deem and Ozga 1997; Kirton and

Greene 2000; Benschop 2001; Lorbiecki 2001; Blackmore and Sachs 2003). A specific concern is with how universities have embraced this term. Some critics suggest that 'diversity' enters higher education through marketization: the term is seen as coming from management, and from the imperative to 'manage diversity', or to value diversity 'as if' it was a human resource. Such a managerial focus on diversity works to individuate difference and to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities. These important critiques attend to the word 'diversity' itself, which has been attributed with a problematic genealogy, as having dubious origins, and 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). What is problematic about diversity, by implication, is that it can be 'cut off' from the programmes that seek to challenge inequalities within organizations, and might even take the place of such programmes in defining the social mission of universities. For Benschop the word does not make the right kind of appeal, as it does not so powerfully appeal to 'our sense of social justice' (2001: 1166). For these scholars, among others, the institutional preference for the term 'diversity' is a sign of the lack of commitment to change, and might even allow organizations such as universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities under the banner of difference.

What do we do with such critiques of diversity? What do such critiques do? I ask these questions in the light of my experiences of writing what we could call a 'diversity document' for my university. It was a useful experience for someone who has critiqued such policy documents to be involved in writing one. I tried to bring what I thought was a fairly critical language of anti-racism into what we can probably agree is a neo-liberal technique of governance. I was taught a good lesson, which, of course, means a hard lesson: the language we think of as critical can easily 'lend itself' to the very techniques of governance we critique. First, I realized how difficult it is to write such documents without using 'problematic' language, or without retreating into the aspirational language of liberalism. Second, I realized that writing documents also means giving them up, or even giving them over to the very organizations we wish to change. So we wrote the document, and the university, along with many others, was praised for its policy by the Equality Challenge Unit [ECU],¹ and the vice-chancellor was able to congratulate the university on its performance: we did well. A document that documented the racism of the university became usable as a measure of good performance.² We are right to cringe in such moments.

At the same time, the process of writing the document, which is not as it were 'readable' in the letter of the text, encouraged me to re-think

the strategic nature of diversity work. The conversations we had as a group talking 'about' the document we were writing clarified for me that importance of linking theory and practice through generating a dialogue between academics and equality or diversity practitioners. It also 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 work as a member of the race equality team involved discussions of how different words (such as diversity and equality) can work, how they get taken up, or get blocked through the associations they have for different staff in the organization.

So even if we agree that words like 'diversity' can be problematic for what they 'cover over', or what they conceal, it does not follow that 'that' is all that they do. In my earlier work, I also engaged in a critique of the language of diversity, by reading documents for what they say (Ahmed 2000). I now want to begin again, asking: what does diversity 'do' when it is 'put into action'? The article offers a tentative response to this question by drawing on data collected between January and June 2004 from ten interviews with diversity or equal opportunities practitioners within Australian universities. This is a small study, which was not intended to generate representative findings, but to explore in detail how diversity practitioners use the language of diversity within specific organizations. 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 can do by evoking that term. What effects does diversity have in such institutional contexts? 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? And if diversity does not necessarily invoke social justice, then does it become associated with equity and justice in practice? For it seems clear that if 'diversity' does not have any necessary meaning, or if diversity is 'cut off' from a specific referent, then it does not necessarily work only to conceal inequalities. We might not know what diversity does in practice in advance of its circulation within organizations.

Diversity and equity fatigue

The overwhelming response 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 marginalization of equal opportunities and affirmative action units, suggesting that universities were not taking such programmes seriously, or that such programmes had marginalized themselves by failing to adapt or respond to changes within the sector. As one interviewee put it, ‘I certainly don’t mean in any way to minimise or denigrate my predecessor but I think to be totally frank that it had become a bit dated and it had actually begun to alienate and become marginalized from the business of the university’. We can see here that the marginalization of equal opportunities is linked to the failure to adhere to the business model of the university.

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 and visible was generally seen as a positive change in the sense that it opened up the capacity for action. By implication, diversity enables action because it does not get associated with the histories of struggle evoked by more ‘marked’ terms such as equality and justice. Diversity is not only a ‘new word’, but it also gets linked with ‘the new’ within the discourses of the university. Of course, this also suggests that diversity ‘works’ because it secures rather than threatens the ethos of the university, with its orientation towards education as a form of business. If this is the case, we need to ask what kind of ‘work’ diversity ‘work’ is doing.

If ‘diversity’ emerges after the failure of the term ‘equality’ to work, then ‘diversity’ itself might be read as symptomatic of the failure to achieve equality. The politics of this turn to diversity is indeed 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” [both laugh].

We can see here that the reason for ‘tiredness’ of the term ‘equity’ is that it is ‘thrown around a lot’, that is, it has been repeatedly used, and maybe even 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 fail to act. 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 terms are repeated over time the more resistance there is to ‘hearing them’.³ 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 here she goes’).⁴

In another interview, it was suggested that we need constantly to ‘switch’ terms to be effective ‘champions’ for social change. The 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 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 a 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 is also problematic, or at least it involves risks. As another practitioner 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 be defined in ways that reproduce rather than challenge social privilege.

So on the one hand, the capacity for the term 'diversity' to move, and to be associated with a wider vocabulary of terms is what allows it to work. But on the other hand, the capacity of the term to move also signals how it can cease to challenge social privilege and advantage, and even come to work in ways that might conceal such forms of privilege. In the meeting with members of the Victorian Branch of EOPHEA,⁵ 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. The confidence 'in the term diversity' might best be explained as confidence in the capacity to ensure the conditions of its use and circulation, 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 practitioners 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 necessarily 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, and which 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 social 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 one 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, which can be inhabited within the organization.

Diversity strategies

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 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.

Some cases used by practitioners are based on a business model. But while practitioners might use the business case model when appealing to senior managers, they also tend to define diversity with a social justice framework for themselves. One practitioner, for instance, describes herself as both ‘a counter-hegemonic worker’ and a ‘whore’: as willing to use any language, including the language of money and compliance, in the interests of enabling the transformation of social relationships of dominance and subordination, as a set of interests that remain undeclared. As she puts it:

I mean I am a complete whore when it comes to using any means that I can to get the stuff on the agenda to get things happening. I don’t care. So if I have to mount the argument about productive diversity because we can’t afford to lose people of talent and they

need to be provided with opportunity to engage with the university so that we can maximise our bottom line if you like, I'll use that argument, because the end effect is the same. If I'm in a situation where people are kind of anti the feminist thing but they are pro internationalism I don't care, I will talk to them about the issues around globalization and internationalism and the need for enhancing understanding of people of difference. I shall use those discussions; I shall use those terms, because those are the terms that they understand.

This practitioner identified her mandate as 'enabling cultural change' and defines her project in terms of outcomes, 'end effects' or 'things happening'. Other practitioners did not define their own model of diversity by distinguishing between the political purpose of their work and the language they use. In these instances, different cases are used for different audiences (including the social justice and business case language) without one case being attributed as 'the real reason', or as the underlying motivation 'behind' the appeal. Diversity work becomes here a question of 'what works', where what is meant by 'diversity' is kept undefined for strategic reasons.

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. This 'switching' partly involves attaching the word 'diversity' to other words, by mobilizing different kinds of vocabularies. 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 organization. What is interesting to ask, of course, is how the university becomes 'an entity', or even a subject, which is imagined as 'having' its own character, and qualities. Clearly, the university can be imagined in such terms only as effects of complex histories, as well as the physicality of its space, and its position within local, regional and global economies. One of the most interesting parts of the research process was 'visiting' the different campuses, with their different arrangements giving each university quite a distinct feel. In my field notes after my first interview, I wrote the following:

This is a very different environment. There is no sandstone. Somehow that goes with the kind of bodies that populate its lawns and buildings. There are lots of black and brown bodies; I can really see the difference. In the student union, the atmosphere is lively. The

socialist workers are visible outside, and posters cover the walls about women's space, queer groups and anti-violence campaigns. Although we can't stick all of this together (buildings, bodies, politics) somehow it goes together.

I am, of course, a visitor passing through, and not an inhabitant of the university. And yet, the university is also, for me, a familiar space, a space in which I am at home, even if each university provides a different kind of space. Through marketing, universities not only have a logo, and even a brand, but they also attribute themselves with some qualities (and not others), as being a certain kind of organization. The ideal image of the university has effects: if the university sees itself as research-led for example, and as being elite and global, then this orientation clearly involves forms of commitment in pursuit of that ideal image. So the work of creating a university is about the organization of commitment: the university 'decides' how to commit its resources, or is even brought into being as an effect of such decisions that are repeated over time, but which are forgotten in time.⁶ As Dick Hebdige put it in his early work on subcultures, 'the buildings literally reproduce in concrete terms prevailing (ideological) notions are what education is and it is through this process that the educational structure, which can, of course, be altered, is placed beyond question and appears to us as "given", that is, as immutable. In this sense, the frames of our thinking have been translated into actual bricks and mortar' (1979: 12–13).

It is no accident, then, that 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 the newer universities, the ideal image might even be 'about' diversity, in the sense that they may see themselves as 'diversity led' organizations, and this could even be their marketing appeal. To market oneself as 'diversity led' means to market the university as 'for everyone', which creates difficulties in the face of continued restrictions of access determined in part by government policy. 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', also suggested 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 that

as being an equity university but that doesn't mean that we actually do anything, so we don't actually have a lot of programmes 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'. To be seen as 'being diverse' leads to the failure to commit to 'doing diversity', as the organization says it 'is it', or even that it already 'does it', which means that it sees there is nothing left to do.⁸

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 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. In such cases, practitioners work to associate the word 'diversity' with the core missions of the university (such as achieving an international reputation for research), which might mean associating 'diversity' with 'attracting' certain kinds of people to the university. In effect, practitioners found ways in which diversity can be attached to educational and social advantage, and they have done this primarily through using the language of globalization, 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) a 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.

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, as a variety that takes some forms and not others. The discourse of global citizenship is indeed a useful one: 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.⁹ In other words, diversity becomes an instrument or technique not only for attracting people to the university, but also for dealing with differences within the lived environment of the university. Diversity here is not associated with challenging disadvantage, but becomes another way of 'doing advantage' within the context of globalization. If using the language of 'global' as 'diversity people' is detached from any social justice agenda, it does not follow that in practice it simply maintains social advantage.

Such language is used to make diversity appealing to senior managers, but what then counts 'in practice', could involve other kinds of work.

We can see that diversity work appeals to the ideal image universities have of themselves. But equally, diversity work requires that diversity officers' challenge rather than appeal to the ideal image the university has of itself. For 'diversity proud' organizations the task may also involve exposing 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 ground of compliance, often talk about the costs of not making a commitment to diversity.

Such costs can certainly be described in economic terms. 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 expose 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'. In other words, data is used as a technology for exposing the failure of the university to live up to its diversity ideals: 'Yeah, yeah, it's embarrassing when it goes up'. Practitioners use data as a public form of exposure. In other words, to make diversity count the university is exposed as failing diversity as a 'body count'.¹⁰

Here, diversity works to shape public feelings: making the university 'feel bad' is a way of enabling it to commit to 'doing good'. Diversity work involves working with as well as through emotions. Diversity work is after all emotional work. My interviews were full of descriptions of this emotionality: the frustration, tiredness and depression of feeling like 'your butting your head against a brick wall', as well as the 'elation' of when you get the message through. Emotions also provide a technology that is used in making diversity appeals. Sometimes practitioners need to make people/leaders/the institution 'feel bad' (about not doing this or that), as in the example described above. At other times, practitioners make people/leaders/the institution 'feel good' (about doing this or that). As one officer put it: 'and you know the saying, you get a lot more with a teaspoon of honey than a teaspoon of vinegar'. The politics of 'feeling good' is clearly evident in the cultural enrichment discourse of diversity, which one practitioner described as 'the Thai food stall' model. Diversity is here celebrated, and even consumed; it is taken 'into' the body of the university, as well as the bodies of individuals. As bell hooks suggests, 'within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture' (1992: 21). The whiteness of organizations might be

reproduced at the very moment they 'embrace diversity', as if diversity is what adds spice and colour to 'mainstream white culture'. By implication, diversity is associated with the very arrival of Black and Minority Ethnic staff: such that consuming diversity gets translated into 'eating the other'. The pleasures of consumption make diversity 'appealing', as something to be shared and enjoyed.

Diversity might 'appeal' insofar as it converts difference into pleasure. And yet, diversity can still generate other effects. It could be that diversity work 'works' by shifting between emotional registers. Indeed, the question of what associations the word diversity has for staff within organizations is partly about the emotional connotations the term has for different people. Some of my interviewees suggested that diversity works precisely because it is comfortable and lets people feel better about difficult issues. Others suggest diversity can cause discomfort, as it still gets associated (through its proximity to certain kinds of bodies), to other more challenging terms (such as 'women', 'feminism', 'equality', 'justice', 'anti-racism', and so on), which are challenging as they make more explicit the challenge to privilege. If the word 'diversity' is mobile, as I suggested earlier, then it is important to recognize that it is not free from baggage. Indeed, the word diversity maybe 'sticky', it may stick to some things more than others, even if it has different associations for individuals and groups. The question of what we hear when we hear the word 'diversity' may be dependent on complex psycho-biographical as well as institutional histories.

Practitioners also switch between compliance-based and value-based arguments in making diversity appeals. In the case of the former, the language of expertise is mobilized. As one practitioner put it: 'on a policy level, that required a lot of input with equity expertise and I guess that's what we ... that's how we position ourselves in the university, as the equity experts and if there are things to be operationalised around that then we shall ensure that we still have a strong voice in that if we are not involved in the actual operational side of it and certainly the policy setting is something that we'd consider to be our prime responsibility'. Practitioners are positioned as having the knowledge and skills necessary for the implementation of policy, in other words, for the alignment of the university with the requirements of law and government. At the same time, some anxiety was expressed about the use of compliance-based arguments: 'we try very hard here not to talk about the legislation because nobody wants to know that we're being legislatively driven. It seems to be a message that we hear, so we're very careful about saying, "we've got this because the legislation ...". We're doing this because it's good for the university. Always.' In some cases, then, diversity is 'taken on' precisely through a resistance to the discourse of compliance, a resistance which requires

linking diversity to what is 'good' for the university, where 'good' is not reducible to economic benefits.

The appeal of the term 'diversity' also depends on how diversity officers construct their own image within the organization. Most of my interviewees discussed the challenge of being taken seriously partly by evoking the historic failure of equal opportunities to be seen as serious and credible, or to be seen as 'a bit dated'. In a way, practitioners have to produce their self-image in defence against this historic reading. Practitioners respond to such a challenge in different ways, but share a commitment to producing themselves as credible and serious in the terms defined by the values and priorities of universities, including those that inform academic culture as well as the culture of management. Diversity work hence involves aligning one's self image with the ideal image of the university. As a result, doing diversity work also involves the performance of a certain kind of subjectivity; or we could even say that diversity works as a technology of self, in which the self is taken seriously by not being seen as 'soft', where soft is seen as a sign of weakness, or emotions, and also of femininity.¹¹ As one practitioner describes, 'it was not about, oh we should do it because it gives us a warm and fuzzy feeling. It was about these are our performance indicators, this is the reasons why, these are the reporting requirements that we have and this is what we should be doing and here's the data to support that'. Data become a crucial technology also in the sense that it aids the production of the competent self. Data are assumed to be 'hard', as a form of evidence whose 'truth' is detached from an emotional orientation to the world ('a warm and fuzzy feeling'). Such a performance is, of course, strategic: to be heard, diversity officers cannot afford to be seen as 'soft', as such a perception would allow diversity itself to be seen as 'soft', and hence as having less value for the organization.

This point reminds us of the problems of working within organizations to enable change. In order to be heard, you have to take on the values of organizations, including hierarchical distinctions between hard and soft, which are not innocent distinctions, but can stand in for social hierarchies (masculine/feminine, white/black and so on). To resist taking on such values through one's talk or self-presentation might not do very much, as it can mean that one is dismissed or not heard. So strategy means using the terms that would allow us to be heard, even when we might critique such terms. The hope of working within institutions is that we can separate our strategies from both intentions and outcomes: that we can 'take on' such terms temporarily to challenge the distribution of power within organizations, but not be taken in by them. The risk of working within organizations as feminist and anti-racist practitioners and academics is that we might become our own strategies, or that the terms we use end up de-limiting what we

do, or even that we come to reproduce the terms ‘as our own’. For me, this is a necessary risk. I would not want to position feminism/anti-racism or diversity work as innocent or outside the structures of privilege that are reproduced within organizations. The risk is not only that we might become the terms we take up, but also that we might presume that we are ‘above’ the terms that are available for use. The question of what to do, how to do it, and how to present one’s case for doing it, is always one we need to ask in the present, as many of the practitioners involved in this study have shown me.

The language of commitment

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. Practitioners move between registers to make diversity appealing: they move between the business case and social justice case arguments, between a politics of good and bad feeling, and between compliance- and value-based arguments. Furthermore, diversity officers work to align their own units, and even their own bodies, with the values that are embedded within academic culture, and the management of the universities. Diversity becomes physically embedded within the university through these multiple alignments: leading in some cases, to diversity weeks, prizes and events becoming part of the University Calendar.

At the same time, such alignments help to show us that diversity work ‘works’ only insofar as it depends on how universities have already committed their resources in terms of the key values that shape the distributions of time as well as money. This is why diversity officers are increasingly entering into the collective discussion about the values of the university, for example, by becoming involved in the process of writing strategic plans and mission statements. They intervene not necessarily by making diversity ‘valuable’ on ‘its own terms’, whether or not that value is defined in monetary terms, but by associating the word ‘diversity’ with the other ‘terms’ that are used by universities in defining their core missions. As one practitioner puts it: ‘we certainly have used (the business) case over the years and increasingly that does make more sense to people out there when they have to account for the way that their budget looks. In universities I think that there’s a tendency not to want to think in those kinds of commercial terms and I think that’s a good thing and there is, certainly at . . . anyway, there are conversations going around that are currently asking the question “what are our values, who are we as a university, are we doing all the things that we said we do in our mission statement, etc”’. Embedding

diversity within the values of the university becomes, at least in this framework, the goal of diversity work. This means talking about diversity within the ongoing conversations 'about' what the university itself is 'about'.

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 organizations, 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 organization, but where that claim is not followed through by action or by the re-allocation of resources.

We could say that organizations involve the organization of commitment. When diversity officers evoke commitment they often describe it as something individuals 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 organization. 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.

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 prioritize 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'.

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. 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 organization. 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. Indeed, one of the central debates around 'mainstreaming' diversity and equity can be re-articulated in terms of the politics of commitment. In one university involved in this study, a decision was made to disband the equal opportunities unit, and to re-locate this work within human resources. This decision was justified as part of the project of integrating or mainstreaming diversity.

I can certainly see the logic of this argument. In another interview, 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: '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'. 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 organization do not have to do it. The distribution of responsibility for diversity, what I am calling the 'organization of commitment', is uneven. It involves some individuals and units being 'given' this responsibility, in order that others not only do not have to 'have it', but can actually give it up.

At the same time, the project of 'integrating diversity' by not having a diversity unit, which works on the principle that 'everyone' should be responsible for diversity, does not seem to work. I would speculate that 'everyone' translates quickly into 'no one': unless responsibility is

given to someone, then it is both refused and diffused within the organization, as we can see from the following discussion with a practitioner based in human resources.

b. Yes, well that's another story too. The university did have an equal opportunity unit, which had, let me see, about 3 or 4 staff. The university decided to disband the equal opportunity unit. The director's position was made redundant. One of the staff members went into a more student focused area and one of the other main staff members came to us as an equity and diversity consultant and she was very knowledgeable in what she did, very enthusiastic, would motivate people, she's a great trainer. But she left us in September 2002.

a. That's a while back.

b. Yes, so what happened, I took on, one of her main roles which was being the support or project officer for the gender equity and diversity committee; this is a committee of the Vice Chancellor and it has senior staff on it. So I took on that role and then I seemed to get other little bits and pieces of her role, even though some of the other HR managers were also looking after some of the equity issues – it was spread across.

a. So it wasn't officially handed over to you.

b. No, no, because our general manager didn't want me to be seen as the equity person. We didn't want that, because what we were trying to do was share it across the board, because we were all feeling choc-a-block full of work anyway, that no one person had the time to take it on in total, and we wanted to continue the efforts for mainstream equity and diversity across the university. That's why we didn't want a central focus.

a. So is that why there was no appointment made?

b. Yes, basically. I suppose in some respects it's worked. In other respects it hasn't worked, because we haven't been able to give it as much attention as we would have liked.

The interviewee describes herself as the 'care-taker' of diversity, even if she is not known within the institution as 'the equity person'. In this case, the project of mainstreaming is about 'spreading' and 'sharing' the responsibility for diversity, rather than giving it to someone. But we can see that such an aim of shared responsibility has not been fulfilled: the success of mainstreaming is limited by the lack of 'attention' given to diversity and equity. By implication, working on diversity and equity requires an acceptance of the uneven distribution of commitment, rather than a fantasy that 'everyone' can share responsibility. Of course, this issue is complicated. On the one hand, to depend upon the uneven distribution of commitment is to repeat that unevenness (to allow diversity to be 'given' to some units or bodies and not others), whilst on the other hand, to act 'as if' diversity is a shared

responsibility is both to conceal the unevenness and to diffuse any commitment.

As another practitioner describes:

if we were really successful, we'd do ourselves out of a job. That would be the aim, to not need a unit like this because the mainstream is so complete. When the HR Director at this university took up this mainstreaming (or should that be, became an advocate to mainstreaming) I think that was a dire day, because none of the universities are ready for that kind of concept where it's embedded in every HR policy and everything that everybody does, and it carries itself. Because none of the universities are at that stage. Because you just cannot get to all of the people.

Here, mainstreaming, even as an ideal, becomes a problem in the sense that universities are not ready for it: to act as if mainstreaming is the case, because it should be the case, can be counterproductive because the conditions are not available in the present to make it the case. It is because diversity and equality are *not* mainstream that we need to have support, specialisms and drivers. You need to have responsibility given to some people including leaders, as well as experts who have knowledge as well as commitment, who provide as it were the compulsion to act. One of the problems with the language of mainstreaming is that it gets taken up as if it does happen as well as should happen (as if diversity and equality *are* already mainstream), which allows organization to avoid appointing specialists in the area, or avoid giving diversity and equality the 'additional' institutional support it needs. In other words, the language of mainstreaming can be used to avoid making an organizational commitment.

In some ways it might be useful not to think about commitment as an emotional investment (in the sense of 'to be committed to something'), but as a series of actions that are reproduced over time. Within universities, commitment can be 'read' through the allocation of resources, which, as I suggested in the previous section, include decisions about what counts or what is valuable about the organization, as well as within it. As we have seen, getting the university to 'commit' to diversity involves making cases that appeal to the ideal image the organization has of itself, otherwise known as its brand or marketing appeal. Getting the university to commit still depends upon the commitments of actors within the organization. Achieving commitment depends on commitment, which is one of the 'loops' that explains the difficulty of intervening within the reproduction of power and privilege within organizations. Many comments by diversity practitioners pointed to this paradox: they remain dependent on the ongoing work of committed individuals even when diversity and equity

have been embedded within the strategic missions and operational procedures of the organization. This is why the work of diversity seems 'never-ending': even when universities allocate resources to diversity and equity initiatives that 'allocation' seems to depend on individual persistence, and on individuals who keep saying that diversity counts even when it has, as it were, 'been counted'. The expenditure of time, energy and labour of diversity champions is necessary, even if it also reproduces hierarchies within the university through the uneven distribution of commitment. The depletion of resources is partly manifest in the depletion in the energies and capacities of over-committed individuals and units. If diversity and equity work is less valued by certain universities than other kinds of work, then it is also the case that the commitment of some staff to this kind of work sustains their place as 'beneath' others within the hierarchies of organizations.

The complex relation between individual commitment and collective action is what explains the importance of leadership to the politics of diversity and equality. Statements of commitment by leaders can matter insofar as they challenge the presumption that diversity is the responsibility of diversity practitioners, or of the bodies of those who are seen as different. 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. Expressions of commitment to diversity can allow such terms to accumulate affective value. As another practitioner puts it:

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 organizational culture because there's nowhere for it to go.

This quote 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 terms. Whether or not the leadership makes public its commitment to diversity seems to affect 'where' that word can go, or how it gets 'taken up' within the organization. When leaders do not repeat that term, then it seems that the term has nowhere to go.

Yet, we know it is more complicated. The circulation of the term 'diversity', which we can re-describe as allowing the term to have 'somewhere to go', is not the outcome or goal of diversity work. For the currency of the term can also be what blocks action: what allows the fantasy that the university already 'does it' or 'has it'. So while the

term might need to circulate, if things are 'to be done', it needs to circulate in such a way that the term does not get cut off from histories of struggle which expose inequalities. For diversity practitioners, this means repeating the word 'diversity' in ways that allow others to hear the (often) 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'. In other words, diversity work is not only about accumulating the value of diversity, as a form of social currency, but also re-attaching the word to the other words that embody the histories of struggle against social inequalities.

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 organizations. It is hence not surprising that doing diversity work might work only when the terms get 'taken up' by those who have most capacity to affect change within an organization. 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 may be 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, as well as what they fail to do. It is certainly the case that new forms of public are created around the term diversity, through the circulation of that term. At the same time, it is important to note that terms such as 'diversity' do not always do what they say. We need to contest any such presumption that 'saying diversity' is 'doing diversity', just as we need to suggest that diversity itself is not something that can be simply done. Following the term 'diversity' around instead allows us to identify the conditions in which such terms 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 inequalities and injustice.

If we follow words like 'diversity', then we end up returning to the very spaces in which we live and work. For me, feminist and postcolonial work happens in such times and spaces: in the flesh of the organizations we inhabit. As I suggested in my introduction, doing diversity work means giving up our words, or even giving them over to the very organizations we wish to change. The risk of this work is a necessary one. Words such as 'diversity' might allow the organization to accumulate value, by re-branding itself as being diverse or even as being committed to diversity without, as it were, doing anything. Or they might not. They might yet cause more trouble.

Notes

1. The Equality Challenge Unit [ECU] oversees all equality issue in Higher Education in the UK. Their website is available on: www.ecu.ac.uk. See Ahmed (forthcoming a), for a paper that draws on an interview with the former director of the ECU, Joyce Hill.
2. I was a member of the Race Equality Group set up by my employer to write its race equality policy and action plan, as required by the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000). While this article presents research based in Australian universities undertaken during my sabbatical leave in 2003/2004, I have since completed a similar study with diversity practitioners in ten British universities. This research focuses specifically on the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) and considers what it means for diversity and equality to become measures of organizational performance. See Ahmed (forthcoming) for a discussion of the UK based study.
3. 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 *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2004a), which links the repetition of terms to the accumulation of affective value.
4. At this point in the interview, we both laughed: the joke was that we both recognized this position too well, which is often the position of the feminist speaker who *in being heard as a feminist is not heard* ('oh here she goes').
5. EOPHEA refers to the Equal Opportunity Practitioners Higher Education, Australasia. EOPHEA aims, 'to strengthen and support equal opportunity and affirmative action programs for staff and students in Higher Education' (<http://www.adcet.edu.au/edequity/EOPHEA.aspx>). I used the web site of this organization to contact the individuals and units involved in this study.
6. The decisions are forgotten in the sense that university comes to be inhabited as a specific kind of organization (say as *being* sandstone) as if 'it had always been that way', or as if becoming a university was an organic process, rather than being an effect of decisions made over time.
7. For a theoretical account of how collectives are formed through a shared orientation towards an 'ideal image' see chapter 5 of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2004a). See also chapter 3 of *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Ahmed 2006), where I extend this argument.
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, as it can block the perception of there being a problem in the first place.
9. 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').
10. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2000) uses the expression 'body count', and I thank her for the example of her work and her willingness to ask difficult questions. The 'body count' model can both refer to the use of numbers of minorities as a way of assessing inequality, and the setting of targets for recruitment of minorities in promoting equality. Obviously, inequality is not reducible to a body count precisely given how inequalities are embedded in structures: for instance, getting more women, or more black staff, in senior management positions does not necessarily challenge gender and racial inequalities, though it can be part of the process of enabling structural change. At the same time, the 'body count' implicit in the gathering of data on the demography of organizations (as well as the distribution of staff within organizational hierarchies) can be a useful technology to support arguments, by exposing inequalities within organizations.

11. For an exploration of the metaphor of 'softness' in relation to discourses of nationalism and racism, as well as gender, see the introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed 2004a).

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SARA AHMED is Professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, London.

ADDRESS: Department of Media, Goldsmiths College, Lewisham Way, London SE 14 6NW, UK. Email: <s.ahmed@gold.ac.uk>