The Nonperformativity of Antiracism

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The Nonperformativity of Antiracism

In this paper, I reflect on institutional speech acts: those that make claims "about" or "on behalf" of an institution. Such speech acts involve acts of naming: the institution is named, and in being "given" a name, the institution is also "given" attributes, qualities, and even a character. By "speech acts" I include not just spoken words but writing and visual images—all the materials that give an institution interiority, as if it has a face, as well as feelings, thoughts, or judgments. They might say, for example, "the university regrets," or just simply, "we regret." More specifically, in this paper, I examine documents that are authorized by institutions (such as race-equality policies, which are often signed by, say, the vice-chancellor on behalf of an institution), make claims about the institution (for instance, by describing the institution as having certain qualities, such as being diverse), or point toward future action (by committing an institution to a course of action, such as diversity or equality, which in turn might involve the commitment of resources).

Such speech acts do not do what they say: they do not, as it were, commit a person, organization, or state to an action. Instead, they are nonperformatives. They are speech acts that read as if they are performatives, and this "reading" generates its own effects. For John Langshaw Austin a performative refers 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). For Austin, conditions have to be in place to allow such words to act, or in his

terms, to allow performatives to be "happy." The "action" of the performative is not in the "words," or if it is "in" the words, it is "in" them only in so far as the words are "in the right place" to secure the effect that they name. Performatives succeed when they are uttered by the right person, to the right people, and in a way that takes the right form. As Judith Butler argues, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act', but, rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse *produces the effects that it names*" (1993, 2, emphasis added).

The speech acts that commit the university to equality, I suggest, are non-performatives.[1] They "work" precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name. For Austin, failed performatives are "unhappy": they do not act because the conditions are not in place that are required for the action to succeed (for example, if the person who apologizes is insincere then the apology would be unhappy). In my model of the "nonperformative", the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but it is actually what the speech act is doing. In other words, the nonperformative does not "fail to act" because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it "works" *because* it fails to bring about what it names. My paper will be structured by taking up four specific forms of institutional speech acts: admissions, commitments, performances, and descriptions.

Second, in this paper, I want to suggest that the nonperformativity 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, which "do things," but it also 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. If texts circulate as documents or objects within public culture, then our task is to follow them, to see how they move as well as how they get stuck. So rather than just looking at university documentation on diversity for what it says, although I do this, as close readings are important and necessary, I also ask what they do, in part by talking to practitioners who use these documents to support their actions. This paper hence draws on interviews with diversity and equal opportunities officers or staff from personnel units with responsibility for diversity at ten universities in the United Kingdom, an analysis of policy documents and my own participation in discussions within universities and policy conferences.

The academic and political background to this research is provided by

scholarship in critical race studies that has analyzed institutional racism in higher education in the United Kingdom, in all of its complexity (Modood and Acland 1998; Shiner and Madood 2002; Law, Phillips, and Turney 2004). My argument extends this work by pointing to a relationship between the new discourses of racial equality and the extension of institutional racism. In other words, rather than considering the turn to promoting racial equality as a sign of overcoming institutional racism, my argument will explore the "terms" on which this promotion is happening within higher education.

Admissions

In order to reflect on the politics of institutional speech acts, I want to think first about a politics of admission. I begin by analyzing the concept of institutional racism and the paradoxes that follow when institutional racism becomes part of institutional language. This has happened in the United Kingdom, where institutions (in particular, the police) have either recognized themselves as being institutionally racist or have adopted a definition of institutional racism within their race-equality policies. The Macpherson Report (1999) on the police handling of the murder of a young black man, Stephen Lawrence, has been the key in this public turn. The Macpherson Report is an important document insofar as it recognizes the police force as "institutionally racist." According to 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" (1).

The language of institutional racism was not, of course, invented by the report, but it draws on a long history of black activism and scholarship. How is this language used here? Defining an institution as racist involves recognition of the collective rather than individual nature of racism. Moreover, it 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 institutional racism in such a way that racism is not seen as an ongoing series of actions that shape institutions or 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 (querying, for example, 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 nonwhite others because of a difference that is somehow theirs.

It is worth noting that psychological language that creeps into the definition: "processes, attitudes, and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping" (Macpherson Report 1999, 1). In a way, the institution becomes recognized as racist only through being posited as an individual, as someone who suffers from prejudice but who could be treated so that they would act better toward racialized others. To say "we are racist" is here translated into the statement it seeks to replace, "I am racist," where "our racism" is described as a bad practice that can be changed through learning more tolerant attitudes and behavior. 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 deny or refuse responsibility for collective forms of racism.

But there is more to understanding how institutional racism becomes an institutional admission. What does it mean for a subject or institution to posit itself as being racist? If racism is shaped by actions that do not get seen by those who are its beneficiaries, what does it mean for those beneficiaries to see it? I would suggest that such admissions 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 is, first, 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. What is important here is that the admission converts swiftly into a declarative mode: the speech act, in its performance, is taken up as having shown that the institution has overcome what it is that the speech act admits to. Simply put, admissions of racism become readable as declarations of commitment to antiracism. What does this conversion of admissions into commitments do?

In the United Kingdom, there has been a proliferation of documents on race equality; we might even say that race equality is increasingly being documented or turned into documents. The circulation of race-equality documents in the public sector is a direct result of the 2000 Race Relations Amendment Act, which requires all public bodies to have and enforce a race-equality and action plan. This is an important piece of legislation insofar as race equality now becomes a positive duty; something that organizations must do. The first specific duty under the act for higher and further education organizations is that they must write a race-equality policy. The RRAA has fascinated me partly as it has generated a huge amount of documentation: the documentation is, as it were, one of the objects of the act, what it points toward.

My own experience of writing such a document as part of a race-equality team was instructive. We adopted the Macpherson definition of "institutional racism" in the document, although we fell short of naming our institution itself as "being institutionally racist." In working on this policy, we tried to bring a critical language of antiracism into the wording of the document. This meant that in the document we identified inequalities and racism as the history behind the document: in other words, we took up "diversity" and "equality" as terms within the document given that they do not describe the institution.

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. So we wrote the document, and the university was praised for its policy by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), and the vice chancellor was able to congratulate the university on its performance: we did well. At a meeting with staff, the vice chancellor praised staff for their excellent work, referring to the letter from the ECU. It was a feel good moment, but those of us who wrote the document did not feel so good. A document that documented the racism of the university became usable as a measure of good performance. Here, having a good race-equality policy quickly got translated

into being good at race equality. Such a translation works to conceal the very inequalities that the documents were written to reveal. The document becomes a fetishized object, something that has value by being cut off from the process of documentation. In other words, its very existence is taken as evidence that the institutional environment documented by the document (racism, inequality, injustice) has been overcome; as if by saying that we "do it" means that's no longer what we do.

Commitments

Such documents function as statements of commitment to race equality: indeed, such commitments are often made in the first sentences of the policies. Having a race-equality policy, especially having a "good race-equality policy," is about making an institutional commitment public. The documents are read as signs of commitment and in turn seem to commit the institution to doing something. Or do they?

Let me quote from the opening paragraphs of two race-equality policies:

> The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (RRAA 2000) places a requirement on a wide range of public authorities, including all Further and Higher Education institutions, to promote race equality in a proactive way through all their functions and to publish a Race Equality Policy. This Race Equality Policy has been published to inform all [xxx] staff and students and all other partners of our institutional commitment under the requirements of the RRAA 2000. [xxx] recognises that by embracing diversity it can achieve its ultimate goal to become a 'world class University' and pursue excellence in research, teaching and clinical service.
>
> . . .
>
> [xxx] values its diverse community and is opposed to racism in all its forms. The [xxx] is committed to the fair and equal treatment of all individuals and aims to ensure that no-one in the [xxx] community is disadvantaged on the grounds of race, cultural background, ethnic or national origin or religious belief.

These documents show the different ways in which the university is imagined as a subject with a commitment to race equality. In the first one, the policy begins with law: it frames the institutional commitment in terms of

compliance with law. In a way, then, the document names its commitment by framing that commitment as a requirement: we commit insofar as we are required to do so. Commitment here is literally under the law. We might note that while this institutional commitment is named, it is not named as a commitment to something; we are simply committed to whatever the law commits us to do.

The second quote seems to take us further, insofar as it names racism and declares the organization as being opposed to racism. At the same time, the statement also functions to bring the organization into the policy as being antiracist, a self-declaration that ironically can participate in the concealment of racism within the university. Declaring a commitment to opposing racism might function as a form of organizational pride: antiracism as a speech act might then accumulate value for the organization, as a sign of its own commitment. A university that commits to antiracism might also be one that does not recognize racism as an ongoing reality, or if it did recognize such racism, then it would be more likely to see that racism as coming from "strangers" outside of the institution rather than "natives" inside it. It is as if the university now says, if we are committed to antiracism (and we have said we are), then how can we be racists? Declarations of commitment can block recognition of racism. Paradoxically, the recognition of racism can be taken up as a sign of commitment, which in turn blocks the recognition of racism. The work of such speech acts seems to be precisely how they function to hinder rather than enable action. In other words, the failure, or the nonperformativity, of antiracist speech acts is a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority, which conceals the ongoing reality of racism.

In one 2005 newspaper article about racism experienced by international students at Royal Holloway, we can see exactly this mechanism at work. Students from Korea complained about racism experienced on campus and about the failure of the college to respond adequately: "Students, particularly east Asian students, feel fearful of these attacks and are deeply concerned that something should be done. But, they have no proper channels of complaint and are worried that too much noise would have a negative effect on their status at college" (Pai 2005, 3). The article highlights the multiples ways that racism can affect the experiences of black and Asian students: it can involve direct violence, and it also affects how students respond to such violence, fearing that reporting racism would lead to further marginalization. But the response of the college to this report was to deny the students'

charges: "Royal Holloway's spokeswoman said: 'This could not be further from the truth. *The college prides itself on its levels of pastoral care'*" (Pai 2005, 3, emphasis added). In other words, organizational pride and the self-perception of being good block the recognition of racism. Organizational pride in being good at hearing messages prevents the message getting through. Such a speech act does exactly what it says that it does not do: it refuses to hear complaint in the very moment it says that it does hear complaint. If colleges have pride in their policies of pastoral care and antiracism, then they also fail to hear about racism. Being committed to antiracism can function as a perverse performance of racism: "you" are wrong to describe us as uncaring and racist because "we" are committed to being antiracist. Antiracism functions here as a discourse of organizational pride.

As I have suggested, many of the race-equality documents function as statements of commitment and take a simple form: "we are committed to . . . ." Such statements of commitment might work to limit rather than enable action, insofar as they block recognition of the ongoing nature of what it is the organization is committed to opposing. However, we can still ask the question, what do statements of commitment commit institutions to do?

When asking practitioners about this process of writing race-equality policies, I ask specifically about statements of commitment. What do they (or do they?) commit the university to do? In the following exchange between me and three interviewees from the personnel department of a university, we can see the hesitation that follows such a question.

> Question: It's a statement of commitment clearly as many of them are, do you feel that the statement itself commits the university to something?

> Responses:
> I would say yes but don't say why.
> Yes it does, but my angle, I suppose, is that you have to have reminders, examples, arguments all the time.
> And I think it's a good working document that people can take with them.
> But people don't like being told to read it.
> Yes they don't like it.
> We don't like being told we have to tick these boxes.

It is true, but it exists, and I think it's a reference document and people will go back and read it if they wanted to find out something. But people don't want to be told to read it.

If we took statements of commitment as performatives, we would say that they commit a person to something. But such performativity is not assumed by practitioners. The first response is that the statement of commitment does "commit", but for unknown reasons. This uncertainty is itself telling, for it suggests that commitment is in some way mysterious and would need to be explained. In other words, the commitment does not simply follow the letter of the document. The word "commitment" does not do what it says. The second response also is a "yes" but a qualified one: the statement of commitment does commit, but it has to be supplemented by other forms of institutional pressure (reminders, examples, and so on). In other words, the commitment is not given by the document but depends on the work generated around the document. It is interesting that the next intervention begins with further qualification: "but people don't like to be told to read it." If the statement of commitment does not necessarily commit the university to doing anything, then practitioners have to keep up the pressure; it is this pressure that can mean that documents do not work. This is a telling pressure for diversity workers: we have to put pressure on the document because it does not work, and the pressure on documents is what makes them not work. The compulsion to read the document means that it loses rather than gains currency. If people are required to read it, then they "don't like it." Indeed, the following utterance moves from "they don't like it" to "we don't like being told to tick these boxes." The commitment itself becomes a "tick" in the box. Now "commitment" is usually described in opposition to the "tick box"; a tick box approach to diversity would be where institutions go along with the process, but are not "behind" the action. For commitment to become a tick in the box is to suggest that "being behind" can itself be a matter of institutional performance. We create the illusion of being behind an action, even at the moment the action is not performed.

The final utterance describes the statement of commitment as a "reference document" that people can use. This document then exists insofar as people refer back to it, as something that can help them to do things. Such documents by implication can only work if they are not obligatory: if people do not have to use them, then they might work. What this sequences of utterance shows is

not only how documents of commitment are perceived as non-commitments in and of themselves but also how this lack of commitment in the document—which implies that we have to be committed to them to make them work—is what makes them less likely to generate commitment in others.

The question then becomes where commitment is located, if it is not in the statements of commitment or in the people who generate such statements. Why does commitment matter so much to diversity and equality work, if it seems always not to be where it should be? I asked why statements of commitment matter to another practitioner:

> Oh that's hard. I think you cannot not have them, if you don't have them, well to me as a practitioner it's a starting point, again it's whether that gets fitted into practice. Commitments can't come without other actions. So the commitment to me is about what the institution believes in and what it intends to do—it can't stand alone, it has to come with how you're actually going to do it. I think if they weren't there then, well I refer to them quite a lot as you well know, if you're trying to, let's say there's an issue that's come up and somebody is not, maybe there's an issue and perhaps they're racist in what they bring up in their practice or something like that, and it's good to refer back to these documents, but actually you're an employee of the university and the university has made a statement about this. So in terms of watching the other members of staff and in my own experience, I've used it for that.

The sentence "commitments can't come without other actions" is instructive because it suggests that commitment is an action, but it is one that does not act on its own. Instead, it depends on other actions, or on what is done with it. Commitment might be, in other words, a technology that can be used or deployed within specific settings. The work of commitment is how you act on the action: it is about what the action allows the practitioner to do. The statement of commitment is also described as a reference point, something you can use, when challenging how people act within the institution. In other words, the statement of commitment does not commit the institution to anything, but it allows the practitioner to support their claims for or against specific action. The statement functions as a supporting device.

So although a statement of commitment can block action by constructing the university or organization as already committed to race equality, these statements also can support other actions precisely by giving this illusion of

being behind. Practitioners use such statements to challenge people within the organization, by showing they are "out of line" with the direction of the organization, even if this line is itself imaginary and does not direct institutional action. Documents do not simply have a referential or descriptive function: it is not simply that they describe principles that a university already has. Indeed, in a way, the documents might even perform a lie insofar as they represent the university as if it has principles that it does not have. But this can be a useful lie: by producing the university as if it was a subject with such principles, the documents then become usable as they allow practitioners to make members of the university as well as the university itself as an imagined entity subject to those principles. Statements of commitment then might do something, not in and of themselves, but because they enable the exposure of a gap between what organizations say they do, and what they actually do: indeed, they might "do something" insofar as they fail to describe what organizations do.

Performing Equality

So what work are these documents doing in their failure to bring about the effects that they name? Such documents arguably are forms of institutional performance. They are ways in which universities perform an image of themselves, to be sure, but they are also ways in which universities perform in the sense of "doing well." To return to my own experience of writing a diversity document: the document that documents racism becomes usable as a measure of good performance. What does it mean for "equality" and "diversity" to be seen as measurable in the first place? Are they becoming boxes to be ticked? Or a "paper trail" that goes nowhere?

Diversity and equality are increasingly discussed in the United Kingdom through an emphasis on good practice. Although good practice is often seen as "beyond the tick box" (or rather, the tick box approach is seen as bad practice), I would suggest that "the tick box" and the "good practice" are part of the same vocabulary. The tick box shows we have done it (whatever we do) while the good practice shows we have done it (whatever we do), where the "it" is taken as a sign of good performance. Good practice guides and toolkits are produced based on the principle that the best way of improving institutional performance is to share good practice. These documents too move around. An example can be taken from the ECU toolkit on communications, "Good Talking: The HE Communicators Equality and Diversity Toolkit,"

which includes the following as an example of "general good practice": "University of Southampton has produced institutional equality and diversity gifts and novelties that are in great demand." For diversity novelties to become a sign of good practice is clear evidence of how diversity is being repackaged, as if it was a property of objects that can be passed around. So an organization even gets a "tick" for its novelties.

The RRAA signals a shift within the public sectors toward seeing equality and diversity as performance indicators, as things that can be measured. Heidi Mirza (2005) has described this as the "bureaucratisation of diversity." Indeed, the RRAA has encouraged the shift toward seeing diversity and equality work as auditable. Audit culture not only measures performance but it depends on the reliability of such measurements. It also associates good performance with accountability, efficiency, and quality, assumed goals for organizations (Powers 1994, 1). Race equality would be something that could be measured, such that doing well would become an indicator of institutional good performance. In other words, race equality would be a sign of accountability, efficiency, and quality.

Practitioners expressed mixed feelings about equality and diversity becoming auditable. Some suggested that to audit equality and diversity would be a good thing, as universities only take seriously the activities that are audited and attached to financial returns or penalties. As one interviewee describes, "I think it would be useful in the HE sector because it wouldn't have been done, just thinking about how they could operate and how they've been lagging behind, it was the push, you know you had to do it." Audit becomes here a "stick" that would compel action, as a compulsion that energizes or creates an institutional drive. Others suggested that audit would not necessarily work, given how audit culture works as a kind of awareness of itself. As one director of personnel elaborates:

> An audit can establish if we have gone through processes, it can't really determine whether we are altering culture here. It can perhaps show whether we are reaching various targets, say you know, the same teacher of leadership staff who come from various backgrounds over time. But the trouble is when dealing with audit you tend always to respond in terms of process you know, we've done this report, we've got a plan out and all that sort of stuff. And I could see that you could get a rough idea if universities were putting effort into diversity by doing that, but the trouble is that in

universities we've got an audit-aware culture in administrations. And so people are practiced at how to show auditors that processes are being gone through.

So if diversity and equality were audited, then universities would be able to show they have gone through the right processes, however they define those processes. In other words, personnel can become good at audit by producing auditable documents, which would mean the universities that did well on race equality would be simply the ones that were good at creating auditable systems.

What it is important to note here is that audit culture too is very much about the politics of documentation. One does not audit something that is already in place. The audit generates a system by generating documents that are auditable. As Michael Powers argues, audit culture is what "makes things auditable" (1994, 33). Or, as Chris Shore and Susan Wright describe in their excellent account of audit in higher education: "The result has been the invention of a host of 'auditable structures' and paper trails to demonstrate 'evidence of system' to visiting inspectors" (2000, 72). The document is the paper in such a trail. The auditable document would be the document that "refers back" to the terms set up an in auditing system. Benchmarking works by generating documents that refer back to the benchmarks, produces a family of documents around the terms. It is not then that "diversity" and "equality" are simply in the documents: instead, they are terms used by documents, in reference to terms that have already been made. When we measure such documents, we might then be measuring how their terms correspond with other terms, such as those set up by the Race Relations Amendment Act itself. What does it mean for the correspondence of terms to be a measure of good performance? What is being measured when diversity becomes a measure of institutional performance?

I asked this question to one diversity practitioner whose university received an excellent rank for their race-equality policy, and she suggested that: "We are good at writing documents." I replied, without thinking, "Well yes, one wonders," and we both laughed. Our wonder is skeptical: we wonder whether what is being measured are levels of institutional competence in producing documents rather than what the university is doing in terms of race equality. As this practitioner further describes:

> I was very aware that it wasn't very difficult for me and some of the other people to write a wonderful aspirational document. I think we all have

great writing skills, and we can just do that, because we are good at it, that's what we are expert at. And there comes with that awareness a real anxiety that the writing becomes an end in itself, the reality is being born out by, say, for example, we were commended on our policies, and when the ECU reviewed our Implementation Plans last year there were a number of quite serious criticisms about time slippages, about the fact that we weren't reaching out into the mainstream and the issues hadn't really permeated the institution and the money implemented in certain specific areas. And it wasn't that there was hostility, it was much more of this kind of marshmallow feeling.

In this fascinating statement about the politics of diversity as an institutional performance, the practitioner describes her skill and expertise in terms of writing a "wonderful aspirational document." Being good at writing documents becomes a competency that is also an obstacle for diversity work, as it means that the university gets judged as good *because* of the document. It is this very judgment about the document that blocks action, producing a kind of "marshmallow feeling," a feeling that we are doing enough, or doing well enough, or even that there is nothing left to do.

Many practitioners and academics have expressed concerns that writing documents or having good policies becomes a substitute for action: as this practitioner goes on to say, "you end up doing the document rather than doing the doing." The work that goes into writing the document ends up blocking other kinds of action. Or, to make an even stronger argument: the orientation toward writing good documents can block action, insofar as the document then gets taken up as evidence that we have done the work. As another practitioner describes, "Well I think in terms of the policies, people's views are 'well we've got them now so that's done, it's finished.' I think actually, *I'm not sure if that's even worse than having nothing*, that idea in people's heads that we've done race, when we very clearly haven't done race." The idea that the document is itself an action is what could allow the institution to block recognition of the work that there is to do. The system of rewarding organizations for their performance on diversity and equality not only risks concealing forms of inequality and racism but also supports forms of organizational pride, which reorient the politics of diversity work away from challenging how institutions constitute their identity and toward a promotion of that identity.

As one of my interviewees suggests, diversity work has become promo-

tional work, or what she calls a form of "R and R," that is, about risk and reputation. Diversity involves promoting organizations through remaking their image. In one of my interviews, we discussed a research project that had been funded as part of the university's commitment to race equality, which is described as "perception data" (data that gathers how people perceive an organization). This research project was a target met by the university under its action plan, so of course it is already a tick. What did the research reveal?

> OK yes. It was about uncovering perceptions, um, about the [xxx] as an employer. . . . [xxx] was considered to be an old boys network, as they called it, and white male dominated, and they didn't have the right perceptions of the [xxx] in terms of what it offers and what it brings to the academia. I think most of the external people had the wrong perceptions about the [xxx].
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> . . .
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> And I mean, quotes, there were such funny quotes, like librarians they were sitting there with their cardigans, you know. Um, and things like that, they were shocking reports to read, really, about how people, external people, perceive the [xxx] so we have to try to achieve, you know, we have to try to make the [xxx] an attractive employer.

The politics of diversity and equality has become about image management: diversity and equality work is about generating the right image and correcting the wrong one. According to this logic, people have the wrong perception when they see the organization as white, elite, male, and/or old-fashioned. In other words, what is behind the shock is a belief that the whiteness is in the image rather than in the organization. Diversity and equality work hence becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations. A good performance would then be about being perceived as a diverse and equal organization that is committed to diversity and equality. The perception itself would be the achievement and would be taken as a sign of good performance. The perception then becomes taken up as description: as if being perceived as diverse is what gives the organization such qualities.

Describing Diversity

Race-equality documents work as if they are descriptions: they describe the university not only as having certain principles, but also as having certain

qualities, characteristics, and styles. They are often accompanied by images that give the university a face by adopting the diverse faces of its inhabitants. Through such images and documents, universities are constituted as if they have these qualities. One of the most obvious features of this descriptive purchase in the context of the RRAA is the use of the word "diversity." Diversity enters such documents not only as something the university is committed to but as a quality the university already has, by virtue of the kinds of staff and students that already exist within the organization. We can turn again to some opening sentences of race-equality policies.

> This Race Equality Policy has been published to inform all [xxx] staff and students and all other partners of our institutional commitment under the requirements of the RRAA 2000. [xxx] recognises that by embracing diversity it can achieve its ultimate goal to become a 'world class University' and pursue excellence in research, teaching and clinical service.
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>
> [xxx] values its diverse community and is opposed to racism in all its forms. The [xxx] is committed to the fair and equal treatment of all individuals and aims to ensure that no one in the [xxx] community is disadvantaged on the grounds of race, cultural background, ethnic or national origin or religious belief.

These are interesting documents to read in terms of showing the different ways that the university is imagined as a subject with commitments as well as characteristics. In the first sentence of the first quote, the word "equality" is associated with law and seems to point not to the university's commitment but to the force of law. The document then moves from equality to diversity. Diversity seems more readily embraced, as something that is both taken on and taken in within the constitution of the university as a subject community. We might note, then, that diversity is taken in precisely as it is associated with being a "world class university"; it functions in a way as a term that allows the university to measure up to its ego ideal or its ideal image. Diversity is taken in as an orientation toward the market, a way of being "world class." One way to rearticulate this statement might be, "We are committed to diversity insofar as we are committed to being world class." Diversity might even work through its proximity to the self-image of organizations.

The second quote begins with diversity as a property, as something the organization has. The discourse of valuing diversity is, of course, mainstream,

and it lingers between discourses of economic value (the business case for diversity) and moral value (the social justice case). This model of diversity simultaneously reifies difference as something that already exists in the bodies of others ("we" are diverse because "they" are here). It also transforms difference into a property: if difference is something they are, then it is something we can have. It is this model of diversity as something others bring to the organization that we can see at work in the use of visual images of diverse organizations: images of colorful, happy faces, which show the diversity of the university as something it has embraced.

It is worth noting here the powerful critiques of the turn to diversity within higher education offered by feminist and critical management scholars. Such critiques have suggested 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 were a human resource. Such a managerial focus on diversity, it has been argued, works to individuate difference and to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within organizations such as universities (Kandola and Fullerton 1994; Lorbiecki 2001; Kirton and Greene 2000). These important critiques attend to the word "diversity" itself, which has been attributed with a problematic genealogy, having not only dubious origins but also uncertain and potentially damaging effects. Deem and Ozga (1997) suggest that "the concepts of equity and equal opportunities imply an underlying concept of social justice for all," while "the notion of diversity invokes the existence of difference and variety without any necessary commitment to action or redistributive justice" (33). Similarly, Benschop (2001) suggests that "'diversity' does not so powerfully appeal to our sense of social justice" (1166). For Deem and Ozga, the word "diversity" invokes difference but does not necessarily evoke commitment to action or redistributive justice. What is problematic about diversity, by implication, is that it can be cut off from the programs that seek to challenge inequalities within organizations, and it might even take the place of such programs in defining the social mission of universities. We can certainly see this cut-off point. 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 universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities under the face of diversity.

In light of these critiques, what does the word "diversity" do? It is because diversity does not seem to evoke such histories of struggle that many practi-

tioners are critical of the institutional desire for this term. As one practitioner put it, "I think the concept of diversity, in the way that it is now used in equality, rather than 'diversity' as a word, which I don't really think it has much relationship to, I think it's used as a complete and utter cop-out. I think it's a dreadful concept." Indeed, this practitioner felt so strongly about the "cop-out" of diversity that she refuses to describe herself as an equality and diversity practitioner even though her job title involves both terms. She goes on to describe "diversity" as a "cuddly" concept that extends the university's self-image as being good:

> So now we'll talk about diversity, and that means everybody's different but equal and its all nice and cuddly and we can feel good about it and feel like we've solved it, when actually we're nowhere near solving it, and we need to, I think, have that, well, diversity as a concept fits in much better with the university's idea of what it's doing about being the great benefactor.

We could describe diversity as a politics of feeling good, which allows people to relax and feel less threatened, as if we have already "solved it" and there is nothing else to do. I asked another practitioner why she thinks that the word "diversity" is appealing. She argued that diversity appeals because "it obscures the issues. . . . It can, diversity is like a big shiny red apple right, and it all looks wonderful. This is an example actually a member of staff came up with in my focus group about gender issues, she says, but if you actually cut into that apple there's a rotten core in there, and you know that it's actually all rotting away and it's not actually being addressed. It all looks wonderful but the inequalities aren't being addressed."

Again, the suggestion here is that the appeal of diversity is about looking and feeling good, as an orientation that obscures inequalities like the obscuring of a rotten core behind a shiny surface. Diversity as a term has a marketing appeal: it allows the university to sell itself by presenting itself as a happy place, a place where differences are celebrated, welcomed, and enjoyed. Diversity becomes a form of organizational pride. Not only does this rebranding of the university as being diverse work to conceal racism but it also works to reimagine the university as being antiracist, even beyond race—as if the colors of different races have integrated to create a new hybrid or, even, a bronzed face.

And yet, this practitioner also acknowledges that there are some benefits to diversity in the sense it can "start to engage people." It is a given how di-

versity might make people feel good, that it can be a useful term, as it allows people in: once they are in, we can then do different things or even use a different set of terms. In other words, the word "equality," which is associated with the law, might be less useful as people turn away from it and/or are threatened by the work that it asks them to do. If we use the word "diversity," we might have a better chance of getting through. So it is precisely how diversity might work to conceal racism that might make it a term that can do things. In other words, what makes diversity useful is how it is appealing. If words do things, what they do depends on how they are being used and how they can hook people or bring them in. Indeed, most practitioners describe their work as a question of "what works," of using whatever language works for the different audiences to whom they speak. Diversity work is strategic, even if it has certain political principles behind it. So diversity is used by some precisely because it is a comfortable term that allows people to engage more easily with this kind of work. As a result, practitioners are positive about the term "diversity" for the very reasons some are critical of the term. As one interviewee describes:

> I think for me with equality, as I said, there is some legal framework, and I think sometimes overemphasised. There's a tension, really, because you need to make people aware of the legality, but you want to go beyond that don't you? You don't want it to be about compliance, so for me, I actually think "diversity" is actually a far more positive word than "equality" so for me it's about celebration. Whereas equality feels a bit more about, oh, you know, meetings, legal requirements almost, I don't know, that's just personal.

Here, diversity is something positive: it is about celebration or can be celebrated. This is why it is a useful term. "Equality" evokes compliance and meeting legal requirements. It is no accident that diversity is described as having an energizing effect. For many practitioners the question becomes then not so much whether to use the term "diversity" but how to use it. If the success of the term is that it can be detached from the history of struggle for equalities, then its success might paradoxically depend on being reattached to those very histories. Practitioners hence use the word "diversity" as a way of getting institutional attention, but then they use the word alongside other more worrisome words, or what I call elsewhere, "sticky signs," such as "equality and justice" (Ahmed 2004b, 89–92). As one practitioner suggests:

I have gone for both equality and diversity, so as an institution we do not use the term "diversity" in isolation, nor do we use equality in isolation. Equality is to do with compliance, diversity is more qualitative and can be internally driven and that premise suits us. There are pockets of the institution where diversity is more proactive than other areas and compliance is more of priority in some areas as well. And the both have to work together, they have to be married together, because if you just go down to the compliance level there's no reward in it for the institution and because of the positive images around equality and diversity that we project, it is important for us that both work together. And I think we have gone for that rather than just diversity. But I know some universities have just gone diversity and it depends how you package it.

So what the word "diversity" does might depend on the words it is placed alongside: using diversity with equality associates the political and legal challenge to inequalities with the qualities of feeling attached to the celebration of difference. The aim of such work would be to restick these words together so that when people hear the word "diversity," they hear a challenge to inequality.

At the same time, in order to be heard, practitioners also work by attaching the word "diversity" to the other words that are taken as key to the organization's strategic mission, whether it be excellence, internationalism, or widening participation. In other words, it is the proximity of the term "diversity" to the self-image of organizations that allows the term to accrue value. Take the following quotation:

For me, I think that the, well certainly, our aim in the diversity project is to help the organisation to see how diversity will help meet the strategic plans. So how can diversity help make us top ten in 2010? What will thinking about diversity enable a head of a school that is already very successful to be more successful? That would be my real aim and to live our vision for race, which is excellence through diversity.

Organizational pride gets translated into diversity pride by attaching diversity to the pursuit of excellence. As this practitioner goes on to describe, "[xxx] is very much, well, you know, it really does want to build a reputation and to be seen to be at the front, even if that's a bit risky." Doing diversity is not so much about putting diversity in front but about putting the organiza-

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tion in front and making diversity what follows. Indeed, another practitioner suggests that diversity is simply about getting the best people for the job, which for her is about the organizational mission of excellence: "People really care about excellence, they really get hacked off when somebody second rate is appointed to anything and they don't care what they look like." Interestingly, this practitioner works at an elite and white organization, which is perhaps so secure in its privilege that it does not have to defend itself against those who look different. Diversity can be taken in precisely insofar as it becomes a sign of indifference to difference: "They don't care what they look like."

In following the word "diversity" around, we can see that it gets embraced by organizations insofar as it is proximate to the ideal images organizations already have of themselves. To add "diversity" to a mission statement hence does not necessarily add anything, but, rather, it puts an educational mission in different terms. And yet this word still has baggage and still gets associated with people who look different. As Nirmal Puwar points out, "In policy terms, diversity has overwhelmingly come to mean the inclusion of people who look different" (2004, 1). Ironically, the hope of putting diversity into university documentation is that this word will keep these associations, however problematic they may be. The point would not be to constitute racial others as the origin of diversity, as what adds color to the white face of the university. Rather, insofar as diversity signifies the presence of racial others, then it might also point to how organizations are orientated around whiteness, around those who are already in place. The happy smiling face of diversity would not then simply rebrand the university but point instead to what gets concealed by this very image: the inequalities that are behind it and give it a surface appeal. In other words, the strategy of associating diversity with the organizational pride is that the word might yet work to challenge the ideal image of the organization. It is pride, after all, which is the condition of the possibility for being shamed for exposing gaps between ideals and actions.

If we consider the politics of describing diversity, we can see that such descriptions create fantasy images of the organizations they apparently represent. The document says we are diverse, as if saying it makes it so. In a way, our task must be to refuse to read such documents as performatives, as if they bring into effect what they name. That is not to say that such documents do not matter, or that they do not do any work. They do. Indeed, this non-performativity is what makes them tools that can be used by practitioners as

things that work insofar as they fail to describe or produce what is ongoing or going on within organizations. In other words, by putting commitments in writing —as commitments that are not followed by other actions—such documents can be used as supportive devices, by exposing gaps between words and deeds. This is not to say we should not be critical in the hope invested in such documents. We must be critical. At the same time, we must also consider how such documents circulate, how they move around, and how they get stuck. Following documents around begins with an uncertainty about what these documents will do. They might, at certain points, even cause trouble.

NOTE

1. This paper develops the thesis on the nonperformativity of antiracism originally made in Ahmed (2004a).

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