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To cite this article: Reviewed by Romeo Jackson & Z Nicolazzo (2017) On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 54:4, 467-469, DOI: [10.1080/19496591.2017.1358630](https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2017.1358630)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2017.1358630>



Published online: 12 Sep 2017.



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On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5236-5

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In an era where institutional diversity statements are increasingly common, and at a time when university presidents regularly speak out in support of diversity, college educators may think there is no need for new scholarship to explore issues of diversity in higher education. This, however, is an overly simplistic understanding of how diversity discourse operates on college campuses. In her highly engaging book, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Ahmed (2012) provided a new and refreshing look at diversity, using as her central questions, “What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity?” (p. 1). Grounding her book in a qualitative study of the experiences of diversity practitioners in the UK and Australia in a post Equality Act of 2010 era, Ahmed broke her book into five chapters placed between an introduction and conclusion.

Ahmed begins by cautioning her readers to be wary of institutions’ eagerness to welcome diversity, as it “is a sign of the loss of its critical edge” (p. 1). Ahmed used the introduction to fundamentally question the value of diversity in higher education and how those who do diversity work are undervalued. She takes care to name the ways people of Color are often used to be the embodiment of progress while institutions often remain unchanged. Furthermore, she classified *On Being Included* as a feminist text, hailing the work of scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) and M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) as important precursors, noting that feminism is not necessarily about gender. For Ahmed, it is the ways that her text engages systems that is feminist. In closing, Ahmed highlighted that diversity practitioners enter this work from various points of view and experiences, and that her duty is to analyze how these practitioners describe their work.

In Chapter 1, Ahmed explored the notions of institutions and institutionalization in higher education. Ahmed is seeking to offer an ethnographic view of institutional life through diversity practitioners. At the end of her first section, Ahmed reflected on how institutions engage with and against diversity practitioners and what that can teach her readers about diversity practitioners’ work and the overall value of diversity. In this chapter, readers are also introduced to a framing device that is used throughout the book: the brick wall. Ahmed used the metaphor of the brick wall through her text to name the experiences of resistance from institutional Whiteness as experienced by diversity practitioners. Ahmed ended Chapter 1 with a discussion of institutional racism, noting that institutional racism was named in only one of her interviews, which perhaps flags the troubling state of diversity discourse in higher education.

Chapter 2 aims to explore the problematic use of the word “diversity,” as well as how the unclear definition of diversity may be an intentional choice. Ahmed (2012) warned against the often capitalist marketing-based use of diversity, stating, “Diversity has a commercial value and can be used as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace” (p. 53). Ahmed noted the shift away from “equality” to “diversity” as a way to align diversity work with the institution. She then problematized the causal use of diversity in higher education as a sign of the loss of the radical potential of the word.

Chapters 3 and 4 engage the notion of diversity as a non-performative. Ahmed began Chapter 3 with a discussion of documenting diversity, during which she notes how many of the practitioners felt a “document fatigue” from always having to produce diversity-related reports. Linking the rise in excellence discourse in higher education to the ranking of diversity statements, Ahmed noted, “Policies that are ranked as excellent become models, contributing to the increasingly generic nature of the policies themselves” (p. 109). In Chapter 4, Ahmed introduced readers to the notion of the “non-performative.” Using Butler’s theory of performativity as a referential for her theorizing of the non-performative, Ahmed wrote that non-performatives are a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse’ *does not produce* ‘the effects that it names’” (p. 177). For Ahmed, the non-performative is the nexus of the failure of diversity discourse because not only do non-performatives do nothing but their express purpose is that of doing nothing. In other words, people use non-performatives as a way to not do diversity work.

In Chapter 5, Ahmed explored racism as an active tool to maintain white supremacy in higher education. Ahmed covered a range of topics in this chapter, including how administrators position diversity practitioners as problems to how educators problematically position diversity work as repairing past injustices rather than creating equitable futures. Perhaps the most powerful section of this chapter explores diversity work as a practice in public relations rather than one invested in equity and/or culture change. In her conclusion, Ahmed theorizes that diversity practitioners have a unique standpoint through which to look at educational institutions. In perhaps the boldest line of her book, she advised that “sometimes we have to take the risk of fulfilling the fantasies other people have of us” (p. 179)! Here, Ahmed is challenging her readers to remove the limitations that being perceived as others may impose on diversity practitioners. Indeed, diversity practitioners are often marked as “other” for resisting the very universities they work for, but, perhaps, that is where the true power lies in diversity work. By fulfilling other fantasies, diversity practitioners liberate themselves from diversity as public relations. Ahmed’s text, then, is both a call to action and a call to resist.

On Being Included gives educators the tools to understand the experiences of diversity practitioners. Furthermore, the text offers critical insight into how diversity is deployed on campus, as well as how educators can engage in diversity work in useful, engaging, and productive ways. Ahmed’s book is intentionally not filled with solutions. Instead, Ahmed gives us the tools to understand “the physical and emotional labor of ‘banging your head against a brick wall’” (p. 175), as well as encouraging readers to engage in liberatory thinking about how diversity *could be institutionalized differently* in higher education.

This book would be helpful for a wide range of audiences. Clearly, diversity practitioners at all levels will benefit from the text, including members of diversity task forces. Faculty teaching organizational theory as well as a wide range of higher education courses would benefit from this text from diversity/equity courses to critical race courses to feminist courses. Senior level administrators could also use the text to develop new, more just ways to doing diversity work. Those who work in diversity/culture offices could better understand their own positions within higher

education and leave with ways to navigate systems. Graduate students across fields, but especially those in student affairs, who hope to transform the academy could use this text as a way to think through their future role in higher education. Introductory courses in gender studies or introduction to higher education courses would benefit from this text. However, we advise taking more time with the text than in a graduate-level course.

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