On Being *Included*

Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

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INTRODUCTION

On Arrival

What does diversity do? What are we doing when we use the language of diversity? These questions are ones that I pose in this book as well as to diversity and equality practitioners working in universities. These questions can be asked as open questions only if we proceed with a sense of uncertainty about what diversity is doing and what we are doing with diversity. Strong critiques have been made of the uses of diversity by institutions and of how the arrival of the term “diversity” involves the departure of other (perhaps more critical) terms, including “equality,” “equal opportunities,” and “social justice.” A genealogy of the term “diversity” allows us to think about the appeal of the term as an institutional appeal. We might want to be cautious about the appealing nature of diversity and ask whether the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge. Although this book is written with a sense of caution about diversity, I am also interested in what diversity can and does do. The more I have followed diversity around, the more diversity has captured my interest.

How did I come to be following diversity around? Every research project has a story, which is the story of an arrival. The arrival of this book is a significant departure for me as it is the first book I have written that draws on qualitative empirical research. There are at least two ways of telling the story of the arrival of this book: one focuses on research practice, the other on institutional practice.

The first version: I had previously written about questions of race and difference, although, thinking back, it took time for me to get to the point when I could write about race. My initial research was on feminist theory and postmodernism. When I was working on my doctoral thesis in 1993, I remember searching for an example to ground the chapter I was writing on subjectivity. I can recall actually looking around the room, as if an object, one that I might find lying around, could become my subject. At this moment of looking around, I recalled an experience, one that I had “forgotten.” It came to me as if it were reaching out from the past. The very reach of the past shows that it was not one I had left behind. It was a memory of walking near my home in Adelaide and being stopped by two policemen in a car, one of whom asked me, “Are you Aboriginal?” It turned out that there had been some burglaries in the area. It was an extremely hostile address and an unsettling experience at the time. Having recalled this experience, I wrote about it. The act of writing was a reorientation, affecting not simply what I was writing about but what I was thinking and feeling. As memory, it was an experience of not being white, of being made into a stranger, the one who is recognized as “out of place,” the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as crime or threat. As memory, it was of becoming a stranger in a place I called home.

Why had I forgotten about it? Forgetting has its uses; unpleasant experiences are often the ones that are hard to recall. I had not wanted to think about race; I had not wanted to think about my experiences growing up, as someone who did not belong. Allowing myself to remember was a political reorientation: it led me to think and write about the politics of stranger making; how some and not others become strangers; how emotions of fear and hatred stick to certain bodies; how some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces. Throughout the course of my writing, I have tried to write from this
experience of not belonging, to make sense of that experience, even when it is not the explicit subject of recall.

One of my aims in this book is to show that to account for racism is to offer a different account of the world. I thus do not begin with the category of race but with more apparently open terms. The racialization of the stranger is not immediately apparent—disguised, we might say—by the strict anonymity of the stranger, who after all, we are told from childhood, could be anyone. My own stranger memory taught me that the “could be anyone” points to some bodies more than others. This “could be anyone” only appears as an open possibility, stretching out into a horizon, in which the stranger reappears as the one who is always lurking in the shadows. Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1986) taught us to watch out for what lurks, seeing himself in and as the shadow, the dark body, who is always passing by, at the edges of social experience. In seeing the stranger, we are most certainly seeing someone; in some cases, we are seeing ourselves.

We can think from the experience of becoming a stranger. A stranger experience can be an experience of becoming noticeable, of not passing through or passing by, of being stopped or being held up. A stranger experience can teach us about how bodies come to feel at home through the work of inhabitance, how bodies can extend themselves into spaces creating contours of inhabitable space, as well as how spaces can be extensions of bodies (see Ahmed 2006). This book explores the intimacy of bodily and social space: it develops my earlier arguments about “stranger making” by thinking more concretely about institutional spaces, about how some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm.

There is another story of arrival. I became co-director of the Institute for Women’s Studies at Lancaster University in 2000. I began to attend faculty meetings. I was the only person of color at these meetings. It is important to note that I noticed this: whiteness tends to be visible to those who do not inhabit it (though not always, and not only). During the discussion of one item at a faculty meeting on equality, the dean said something like “race is too difficult to deal with.” I remember wanting to challenge this. But the difficulty of speaking about racism as a person of color meant that I did not speak up during but after the meeting, and even then I wrote rather than spoke. Saying that race is “too difficult” is how racism gets reproduced, I put in an email to the dean. The belief that racism is inevitable is how racism becomes inevitable, I pointed out. (One of the favorite arguments made by senior management was that the university was “very white” because of geography—and that you can’t do anything about geography.) Do something about it, he replies. It shouldn’t be up to me, I answer.

How quickly we can be interpellated! My correspondence with the dean took place in 2000 just before the Race Relations Amendment Act came into effect, which made race equality into a positive duty under law, and required all public institutions to write a race equality policy. The dean spoke to the director of human resources. She got in contact with me, offering an invitation to become a member of the newly formed race equality team responsible for writing our university’s race equality policy. There were two academics on the team, both people of color. There are problems and pitfalls in becoming a diversity person as a person of color. There is a script that stops anyone reading the situation as a becoming. You already embody diversity by providing an institution of whiteness with color.

It is certainly the case that responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed. It is also the case that the distribution of this work is political: if diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional
spaces that are also less valued.

We can get stuck in institutions by being stuck to a category. This is not to say that we cannot or do not value the work of these categories. But we can be constrained even by the categories we love. I had experienced already what it can mean to be “the race person.” Indeed, both academic positions I have held in the United Kingdom were advertised as posts in race and ethnicity, the first in Women’s Studies, the second in Media and Communications. In both cases, the experience felt like being appointed by whiteness (even if the appointment was intended as a countering of whiteness). There we can find ourselves: people of color being interviewed for jobs “on race” by white panels, speaking to white audiences about our work. In both cases the experience was one of solidarity with those who have to face this situation. Whiteness can be a situation we have or are in; when we can name that situation (and even make jokes about it) we recognize each other as strangers to the institution and find in that estrangement a bond. Of course, at the same time, I should stress that we do want there to be posts on race and ethnicity. We also want there to be more than one; we want not to be the one. Becoming the race person means you are the one who is turned to when race turns up. The very fact of your existence can allow others not to turn up.
What is an institution? I want to start my reflections on racism and diversity within institutional life by asking what it means to think about institutions as such. We need to ask how it is that institutions become an object of diversity and antiracist practice in the sense that recognizing the institutional nature of diversity and racism becomes a goal for practitioners. Diversity work is typically described as institutional work. Why this is the case might seem obvious. The obvious is that which tends to be unthought and thus needs to be thought. We can repeat the question by giving it more force: what counts as an institution? Why do institutions count?

These questions are foundational to the social sciences. Emile Durkheim’s definition of sociology is “the science of institutions, of their genesis and functioning” ([1901] 1982: 45). If the institution can be understood as the object of the social sciences, then the institution might be how the social derives its status as science. Durkheim’s description was derived from Marcel Mauss and Paul Fauconnet’s 1901 contribution on sociology to La Grand Encyclopédie (see M. Gane 2005: xii). The history of sociology is indeed a history of institutional thought.

Durkheim’s innovative sociological method suggested that social facts can be approached as things. Arguably, treating institutions as an object of sociological inquiry, as social facts, can risk stabilizing institutions as things. We might stabilize institutions by assuming they refer to what is already stabilized. Within the humanities, the turn to thinking on the question of institutions has been predicated on a critique of sociological models. Samuel Weber’s Institutions and Interpretation (2001), for example, cites with approval the work of René Lourau, who suggests that the sociological theories of institutions tend to assume their stability. Institutions, Lourau suggests, have been:

increasingly used to designate what I and others before me have called the institutional (l’institué), the established order, the already existing norms, the state of fact thereby being confused with the state of right (l’état de droit). By contrast, the instituting aspect (l’instituant) has been increasingly obscured. The political implication of the sociological theories appears clearly here. By emptying the concept of institution of one of its primordial components (that of instituting, in the sense of founding, creating, breaking with an old order and creating a new one), sociology has finally come to identify the institution with the status quo. (Weber 2001: xv)

This reading of sociological work on institutions could be described as presuming the stability of its object (can all “sociological theories” of institutions be reduced to this identification?). Across a range of social science disciplines, including economics and political science as well as sociology, we have witnessed the emergence of “the new institutionalism” concerned precisely with how we can understand institutions as processes or even as effects of processes. Indeed, Victor Nee argues that the new institutionalism “seeks to explain institutions rather than simply assume their existence” (1998: 1). To explain institutions is to give an account of how they emerge or take form. Such explanations require a “thick” form of description, as I suggested in the introduction, a way of describing not simply the activities that take place within institutions (which would allow the institution into the frame of analysis only as a container, as what contains what is described, rather than being part of a description) but how those activities shape the sense of an institution or even institutional sense. The organizational studies scholars James G. March and Johan P.
Olsen suggest that a thick approach to institutions would consider “routines, procedures, conventions, roles, strategies, organizational forms, and technologies” (1989: 22). The new institutionalism aims to think through how institutions become instituted over time (to “flesh out” this how): in other words, to think how institutions acquire the regularity and stability that allows them to be recognizable as institutions in the first place. Institutions can be thought of as verbs as well as nouns: to put the “doing” back into the institution is to attend to how institutional realities become given, without assuming what is given by this given.1

The new institutionalism allows us to consider the work of creating institutions as part of institutional work. Although this chapter does not engage with the “new institutionalism” literatures in a general sense, I consider how phenomenology can offer a resource for thinking about institutionality.2 My arguments thus connect with some of the sociological literature on institutions insofar as the new institutionalism in sociology has been influenced by phenomenology.3 Phenomenology allows us to theorize how a reality is given by becoming background, as that which is taken for granted. Indeed, I argue that a phenomenological approach is well suited to the study of institutions because of the emphasis on how something becomes given by not being the object of perception. Edmund Husserl (often described as the founder of phenomenology) considers “the world from the natural standpoint” as a world that is spread around, or just around, where objects are “more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without themselves being perceived” ([1913] 1969: 100). To be in this world is to be involved with things in such a way that they recede from consciousness. When things become institutional, they recede. To institutionalize x is for x to become routine or ordinary such that x becomes part of the background for those who are part of an institution.

In his later work, Husserl ([1936/54] 1970) came to denote the “world of the natural attitude” as “the life-world,” the world that is given to our immediate experience, a general background or horizon, which is also a world shared with others. To share a world might be to share the points of recession. If the tendency when we are involved in the world is to look over what is around us, then the task of the phenomenologist is to attend to what is looked over, to allow what is “overed” to surface.4 In this chapter, I hope to offer this kind of attention. My primary aim is to offer an ethnographic approach to institutional life that works with the detail of how that life is described by diversity practitioners. Diversity work could be described as a phenomenological practice: a way of attending to what gets passed over as routine or an ordinary feature of institutional life.5 We could even say that diversity workers live an institutional life. Dorothy E. Smith suggests that an institutional ethnography “would begin in the actualities of the lives of some of those involved in the institutional process” (2005: 31). Diversity workers work from their institutional involvement. Diversity practitioners do not simply work at institutions, they also work on them, given that their explicit remit is to redress existing institutional goals or priorities.

This chapter considers why institutions matter for diversity practitioners and explores how an explicit attention to institutions teaches us about their implicit significance and meaning. I want to think specifically about institutional life: not only how institutions acquire a life of their own but also how we experience institutions or what it means to experience something as institutional. We might also need to consider how we experience life within institutions, what it means for life to be “an institutional life.” If the life we bracket as our working life is still a life, we need to attend to the form of this life by attending to what is bracketed by
Institutionalizing Diversity

A typical goal of diversity work is “to institutionalize diversity.” A goal is something that directs an action. It is an aiming for. However, if institutionalizing diversity is a goal for diversity workers, it does not necessarily mean it is the institution’s goal. I think this “not necessarily” describes a paradoxical condition that is a life situation for many diversity practitioners. Having an institutional aim to make diversity a goal can even be a sign that diversity is not an institutional goal.

We could say that practitioners are given the goal of making diversity a goal. In most of my interviews, practitioners began their story with the story of their appointment. In the U.K. context, the appointment of officers is often about the appointment of a writer, of having someone who can write the policies that will effectively institutionalize a commitment to diversity. Let’s take the following account: “I came to [xxx] three and a half years ago and the reason that they appointed someone, I think, was because of the compliance with the Race Relations Amendment Act...you come into a position like this and people just don’t know what kind of direction it’s going to go in, you’re not sort of, there’s nobody helping to support you, this job does not have support mechanisms and you know maybe you’re just there, because if you’re not there then the university can’t say that its dealing with legislation.” An appointment becomes a story of not being given institutional support, as if being “just there” is enough. An appointment of a diversity officer can thus represent the absence of wider support for diversity.

The institutional nature of diversity work is often described in terms of the language of integrating or embedding diversity into the ordinary work or daily routines of an organization. As one practitioner explains, “My role is about embedding equity and diversity practice in the daily practice of this university. I mean, ideally I would do myself out of a job but I suspect that’s not going to happen in the short term, so I didn’t want to do that and I haven’t got the staff or money to do it anyway.” The diversity worker has a job because diversity and equality are not already given; this obvious fact has some less obvious consequences. When your task is to remove the necessity of your existence, then your existence is necessary for the task.

Practitioners partly work at the level of an engagement with explicit institutional goals, that is, of adding diversity to the terms in which institutions set their agendas—what we might think of as an institutional purpose or end. To agree on your aims is to offer an institutional attitude: a set of norms, values, and priorities that determine what is granted and how. Edmund Husserl suggests that “an attitude” means “a habitually fixed style of willing life comprising directions of the will or interests that are prescribed by this style, comprising the ultimate ends, the cultural accomplishments whose total style is thereby determined” (1936/54 1970: 280). To define or agree on the ends of an institution can thus shape what is taken for granted by it and within it. A phenomenology of institutions might be concerned with how these ends are agreed on, such that an individual accomplishment becomes an institutional accomplishment. An institution is given when there is an agreement on what should be accomplished, or what it means to be accomplished.

An institution gives form to its aims in a mission statement. If diversity work is institutional work, then it can mean working on mission statements, getting the term “diversity” included in them. This is not to say that a mission statement simply reflects the aims of the university: as Marilyn Strathern has shown, mission statements are “utterances of a specific kind” that mobilize the “international language of governance” (2006: 104–95). Giving form to institutional goals involves following a set
of conventions. This is not to say that mission statements are any less significant for being conventional; the aim of a convention is still directive. When I participated in an equality and diversity committee, some of our discussions were based on how to get “equality” and “diversity” into the university’s mission statement and other policy statements that were supposed to derive from it. We aimed not only to get the terms in but also to get them up: to get “equality” and “diversity” cited as high up the statement as possible. I recall the feeling of doing this work: in retrospect or in abstract, what we achieved might seem trivial (I remember one rather long discussion about a semicolon in a tag line!), but the task was still saturated with significance. The significance might be thought of as a distraction (you work on something you can achieve as a way of not focusing on—and thus being depressed by—what you cannot) but could also point to how institutional politics can involve the matter of detail; perhaps diversity provides a form of punctuation.

However, institutionalization was not simply defined by practitioners in terms of the formal or explicit goals, values, or priorities of an institution. Many spoke about institutionalization in terms of what institutions “tend to do,” whatever it is they say they are doing or should be doing. The very idea of institutionalization might even denote those tendencies or habitual forms of action that are not named or made explicit. We can thus think of institutions in terms of how some actions become automatic at a collective level; institutional nature might be “second nature.” When an action is incorporated by an institution, it becomes natural to it. Second nature is “accumulated and sedimented history,” as “frozen history that surfaces as nature” (Jacoby 1975: 31). When history accumulates, certain ways of doing things seem natural. An institution takes shape as an effect of what has become automatic. Institutional talk is often about “how we do things here,” where the very claim of a “how” does not need to be claimed. We might describe institutionalization as “becoming background,” when being “in” the institution is to “agree” with what becomes background (or we could speculate that an agreement is how things recede). This becoming background creates a sense of ease and familiarity, an ease that can also take the form of incredulity at the naiveté or ignorance of the newly arrived or outsiders. The familiarity of the institution is a way of inhabiting the familiar.

Institutionalization “comes up” for practitioners partly in their description of their own labor: diversity work is hard because it can involve doing within institutions what would not otherwise be done by them. As one interviewee describes, “You need persistence and I think that’s what you need to do because not everyone has an interest in equity and diversity issues, so I think it needs to be up there in people’s faces, well not right in their faces, but certainly up there with equal billing with other considerations, so that it’s always present, so that they eventually think of it automatically and that it becomes part of their considerations.” The aim is to make thought about equality and diversity issues “automatic.” Diversity workers must be persistent precisely because this kind of thought is not automatic; it is not the kind of thought normally included in “how institutions think,” to borrow an expression from the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1986). Or as Ole Elgström describes in a different but related context, such thoughts have to “fight their way into institutional thinking” (2000: 458). The struggle for diversity to become an institutional thought requires certain people to “fight their way.” Not only this—the persistence required exists in necessary relation to the resistance encountered. The more you persist, the more the signs of this resistance. The more resistance, the more persistence required.

The institution can be experienced by practitioners as resistance. One expression that came up in a number of my interviews was “banging your
head against a brick wall.” Indeed, this experience of the brick wall was often described as an intrinsic part of diversity work. As one practitioner describes, “So much of the time it is a banging-your-head-on-the-brick-wall job.” How interesting that a job description can be a wall description (see figure 1). The feeling of doing diversity work is the feeling of coming up against something that does not move, something solid and tangible.\(^8\) The institution becomes that which you come up against. If we recall that most diversity practitioners are employed by institutions to do diversity (though not all; some have “equality” and “diversity” added to their job descriptions), then we can understand the significance of this description. The official desire to institutionalize diversity does not mean the institution is opened up; indeed, the wall might become all the more apparent, all the more a sign of immobility, the more the institution presents itself as being opened up. The wall gives physical form to what a number of practitioners describe as “institutional inertia,” the lack of an institutional will to change.

Perhaps the habits of the institutions are not revealed unless you come up against them. When something becomes a habit, as the psychologist William James shows, it saves trouble and energy ([1890] 1950: 105):\(^9\) you do not have to attend to something, it does not have to command your attention. In a classical work on the sociology of knowledge, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann identify the origins of institutionalization in the very mechanisms of habituation: “by providing a stable background in which human activity may proceed with a minimum of decision-making most of the time, it frees energy for such decisions as may be necessary on certain occasion. In other words, the background of habitualized activity opens up a foreground for deliberation and innovation” (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 71; emphasis added).\(^{19}\) We can see the immediate difficulty of diversity work: to persist by making diversity into an explicit institutional end, by bringing diversity to the foreground, stops diversity from becoming habitual. While habits save trouble, diversity work creates trouble.

Diversity would be institutionalized when it becomes part of what an institution is already doing, when it ceases to cause trouble. Some universities in the United States now have “offices of institutional diversity.” We need to stay surprised by this; we need the fact of such offices to be surprising. We need an account of the conditions in which such offices of institutional diversity make sense. In this formulation, the institutional is an adjective, as if institutional diversity is a particular kind of diversity. Such offices are also where institutional diversity happens: they institute institutional diversity. How does the institutional diversity
get instituted? There is no doubt there is work involved. An example:

A commitment to diversity is an integral part of the University’s educational mission. The institution’s mission statement says in part that the University “endeavors to prepare the university community and the state for full participation in the global society of the 21st century. Through its programs and practices, it seeks to foster the understanding of and respect for cultural differences necessary for an enlightened and educated citizenry.” The mission of the Office of Institutional Diversity is to lead a focused institutional effort to evaluate existing programs and develop new initiatives to support diversity and equity at the University. The Office of Institutional Diversity seeks to ensure a university where people of many different backgrounds and perspectives join together to actively advance knowledge. As a community dedicated to scholarship, research, instruction, and public service and out-reach, we recognize the importance of respecting, valuing and learning from each other’s differences while seeking common goals. The Office of Institutional Diversity will provide the leadership to establish the University as a national and international model in creative ways to address diversity and equity issues in an academic setting.

Note how this statement directly quotes from the mission statement that describes the purpose of the institution. The Office of Institutional diversity is set up by the institution to institute its commitment to diversity, proving leadership, shaping values, and enabling conversations. The office promotes a culture in which diversity is valued as part of an educational mission. The fact of this office is both an expression of the institution’s commitment to diversity and how that commitment will be expressed. The office will “lead a focused institutional effort.” To institutionalize diversity requires institutional effort within an institution. We might even say that the university as an institution will do diversity through what the office does; it provides the “institutional” in “institutional diversity.”

To embed diversity within an institution involves working with the physicality of the institution: putting diversity into the organizational flow of things. I noticed how diversity practitioners often use the metaphor of the institution as an organic body. This metaphor has a long history as the idea of the social body (see Poovey 1995). The institution, in being imagined as an organic body, is understood as a singular entity made of multiple interrelated parts, all of which contribute to the health or well-being of that body.11 Indeed, organic and mechanical metaphors are used simultaneously as ways of describing the institution. Both metaphors work to convey an entity that is made up of parts, where the communication between parts is essential to an overall performance. Structures of governance make an institution into a body or machine: there is a system of distribution, with paths that transfer materials to each part, each assumed to have their own function or purpose, each participating in the overall health of the body or machine. Practitioners do not simply aim for diversity to become part of an organizational body or machine; they want diversity to go through the whole system.

Diversity practitioners thus develop techniques for embedding diversity or making diversity given. As one practitioner described to me: “There are different ways that you can make diversity a given because it’s actually part of the way you do things. Before it becomes that you have to recognize the value of it and I suppose that’s what I mean by it becoming a given: the university is aware of the value of it on a range of levels and that it wants to benefit from the community of voices that can be heard and act through that diversity.” This comment might remind us that all givens must become given. Perhaps when givens are given, we can forget about this becoming; to quote from Hannah Arendt, when something is given it “loses the air of contingency” (1978: 30).12 If the task of embedding diversity is to find ways to make diversity become given, then diversity has an “air of contingency.” Note as well that to make diversity a given requires achieving institutional recognition of the value of diversity. Such recognition involves an appreciation not only of the value of the term but
also of a “community of voices.” To value diversity is to value those who can “be heard and act” under its name.

To recognize diversity requires that time, energy, and labor be given to diversity. Recognition is thus material as well as symbolic: how time, energy, and labor are directed within institutions affects how they surface. Diversity workers aim to intervene in how the institution surfaces. Doing diversity work can mean passing “diversity” around, both as a word and in documents, as I discuss further in the following two chapters. As one practitioner describes, “I have a general circulation that goes to a diverse group of people, and if it doesn’t get through one way it will get through another, by using about two or three different strategies of the circulation pool, in the end it must get there.” Diversity work is about getting diversity into circulation, such that it can reach diverse people. Circulating diversity can be the aim of diversity work, which of course can bypass the question of what is being circulated. You get “it” out one way or another. Doing diversity requires expanding one’s means of circulating information; for practitioners, diversity work is often about developing diverse communication strategies. We might even say that diversity workers are communication workers. You do diversity by working out how to circulate the matter of diversity around.

The importance of circulation systems to diversity work should not be underestimated. Arguably all institutional work involves the gradual refinement of systems for getting information through to those employed by the institution. My discussions with practitioners taught me that communication becomes an end as well as a means for certain kinds of work within universities. When your task is to get out information that is less valued by an organization, the techniques for moving information around become even more important. You have to persist because there is a resistance to the information getting through: to refer back to an earlier quote, “You need persistence and I think that’s what you need to do because not everyone has an interest in equity and diversity issues.” This practitioner usefully describes diversity work in terms of getting it “up there.” Other practitioners talk about diversity work as putting stuff or material in the right places: “She is vigilant about constantly putting the stuff up on the table, so she is raising the awareness and putting it on the executive agenda so it’s being seen to be part and parcel of university, so that I think is an extraordinarily important thing.” To be part of the university requires tabling: diversity workers have to put stuff “on the table.” I consider how the language of diversity offers a way of getting people to the table in the following chapter.
Institutional Whiteness

We learn from the pragmatics of organizations: how they circulate matter is a reflection of what matters. Diversity work is thus pragmatic work: you work with the very matter of an institution when you institutionalize diversity. How does diversity work relate to the project of challenging institutional whiteness? Nirmal Puwar argues that diversity has come “overwhelmingly to mean the inclusion of people who look different” (2004: 1). The very idea that diversity is about those who “look different” shows us how it can keep whiteness in place. If diversity becomes something that is added to organizations, like color, then it confirms the whiteness of what is already in place. Alternatively, as a sign of the proximity of those who “look different,” diversity can expose the whiteness of those who are already in place. To diversify an institution becomes an institutional action insofar as the necessity of the action reveals the absence or failure of diversity.

Our diversity research team noticed this: the organization we worked for wanted to picture our team in picturing the organization. When our team was their picture, it created the impression that the organization was diverse. Arguably this was a false impression: the other teams were predominantly white. On the other hand, when our team was pictured, it helped expose the whiteness of the other teams. Even if diversity can conceal whiteness by providing an organization with color, it can also expose whiteness by demonstrating the necessity of this act of provision.

We need to think about the relationship between diversity and what we might call “institutional whiteness.” We can think about how diversity involves a repicturing of an institution. The institution might not have an intrinsic character, but it is given character in part by being given a face. Diversity might create a new image of the institution or even a new institutional face. In the diversity world, there is a great deal of investment in images. Diversity might even appear as image, for example, in the form of the multicultural mosaic, as Elaine Swan (2010b) has carefully analyzed. An institutional image is produced in part for external others. The investment in diversity images might teach us about the importance of diversity as a way of managing the relationship between an organization and external others (as I explore later, diversity becomes a form of public relations).

Organizations manage their relation to external others by managing their image. This management can take the form of what speakers in a 2005 conference organized by the Commission for Racial Equality referred to as “perception data,” that is, data collected by organizations about how they are perceived by external communities. In one interview with staff from a human resources department, we discussed such a research project:

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].

And I mean, quotes, there were such funny quotes like librarians, they were sitting there with their cardigans you know. They were shocking reports to read, really, about how people, external people, perceive the [xxx] so we have to try to achieve. We have to try to make the [xxx] an attractive employer.

There are issues of perception amongst certain communities, which are stopping them from reaching us.
Diversity work becomes about generating the “right image” and correcting the wrong one. I was quite interested that they were shocked by this image, given what I knew of the staffing profile of this university. What organizes this shock is the presumption that the perception is the problem. According to this logic, people have the “wrong perception” when they see the organization as white, elite, male, old-fashioned. In other words, behind the shock is a belief that the organization does not have these qualities: that whiteness is “in the image” rather than “in the organization.” Diversity becomes about changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations. Changing perceptions of whiteness can be how an institution can reproduce whiteness, as that which exists but is no longer perceived.

I think the final comment, “there are issues of perception amongst certain communities, which are stopping them from reaching us,” is particularly suggestive. The “certain communities” is an implicit reference to communities of color; race often appears under the euphemism of community, an appearance that is a disappearance (see Ahmed et al. 2006: 30). The implication is that the institution does not reach such communities—it does not include them—because they perceive the institution as excluding them. The problem of whiteness is thus redescribed here not as an institutional problem but as a problem with those who are not included by it.

What would it mean to talk about whiteness as an institutional problem or as a problem of institutions? When we describe institutions as being white, we point to how institutional spaces are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather and create the impression of coherence. When I walk into university meetings, this is what I encounter. Sometimes I get used to it. At one conference we organized, four Black feminists arrived. They all happened to walk into the room at the same time. Yes, we do notice such arrivals. The fact that we notice them tells us more about what is already in place than about “who” arrives. Someone says, “It is like walking into a sea of whiteness.” This phrase comes up, and it hangs in the air. The speech act becomes an object, which gathers us around.

When an arrival is noticeable, we notice what is around. I look around and re-encounter the sea of whiteness. I had become so used to this whiteness that I had stopped noticing it. As many have argued, whiteness is invisible and unmarked, as the absent center against which others appear as points of deviation (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993). Whiteness could be described as a habit insofar as it tends to go unnoticed (Sullivan 2006: 1). Or perhaps whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it or those who get so used to its inhabitance that they learn not to see it, even when they are not it.
That the arrival of some bodies is more noticeable than others reveals an expectation of who will show up. The word “expect” derives from the Latin verb spectare, “to look.” An expectation of who will turn up is not only an expectation of how they will look but also a looking for or a looking out for. An expectation can be hopeful and directive. If you expect such-and-such to turn up, and they turn up, an expectation has been met.

Diversity can also involve a “looking out for.” A typical statement in a job advertisement for public sector organizations is “women and ethnic minorities encouraged to apply,” although this mode of address is increasingly changing to a tagline such as “xxx is an equal opportunities employer,” or even “xxx promotes diversity.” I suspect, however, that the tagline preserves the implication of the address it replaces, conveying without naming the minority subject. The logic exercised here is one of “welcoming,” premised on a distinction between the institution as host and the potential employer as guest. To be made welcome by an explicit act of address works to reveal what is implicit: that those who are already given a place are the ones who are welcoming rather than welcomed, the ones who are in the structural position of hosts.

The logic often used when diversity is institutionalized could be described in terms of “conditional hospitality” (Derrida 2000: 73; Rosello 2001): the other (the stranger, foreigner) is welcomed with conditions or on condition. Rauna Johanna Kuokkanen describes how the academy “presents itself as a welcoming host but not without conditions” (2007: 131). When diversity becomes a form of hospitality, perhaps the organization is the host who receives as guests those who embody diversity. Whiteness is produced as host, as that which is already in place or at home. To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on condition that you give something back in return. The multicultural nation functions this way: the nation offers hospitality and even love to would-be citizens as long as they return this hospitality by integrating, or by identifying with the nation (see Ahmed 2004: 133–34). People of color in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else’s home. People of color are welcomed on condition they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by “being” diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity.

I am speaking of whiteness at a seminar. Someone in the audience says, “But you are a professor,” as if to say when people of color become professors then the whiteness of the world recedes. If only we had the power we are imagined to possess, if only our proximity could be such a force. If only our arrival could be an undoing. I was appointed to teach “the race course,” I reply. I am the only person of color employed on a full-time permanent basis in the department. I hesitate. It becomes too personal. The argument is too hard to sustain when your body is so exposed, when you feel so noticeable. I stop and do not complete my response.

When our appointments and promotions are taken up as signs of organizational commitment to equality and diversity, we are in trouble. Any success is read as a sign of an overcoming of institutional whiteness. “Look, you’re here!” “Look, look!” Our talk about whiteness is read as a form of stubbornness, paranoia, or even melancholia as if we are holding onto something (whiteness) that our arrival shows has already gone. Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude, of failing to be grateful for the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival. This very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, allows an act of inclusion to maintain the form of exclusion.