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Extracting Diversity Value:
The White Cultural Institution's Toolbox

In the last decades, the cultural sector have experienced the proliferation of so-called 'diversity policies' – written agreements promoted by cultural institutions as means to actively address discriminatory practices[1]. Such initiatives commit the organisation to the establishment of a safer, inclusive environment and workforce, and to the promotion of equal opportunities between cultural workers. In *On Being Included* and *This Work isn't For Us*, Sarah Ahmed and Jemma Desai, respectively, give an accurate ethnographic account of their personal experiences as well as that of other 'diversity practitioners'[2] – namely, "cultural workers embodied in difference"[3] hired by institutions with the purpose of implementing their diversity policies, a form of labour that Ahmed summarises under the expression 'diversity work'[4]. The variety of testimonies these authors collect demonstrate the extent to which, as Ahmed argues, "the languages of diversity are mobile, and the story of diversity's inclusion within and by institutions is transnational"[5]. Indeed, both their works outline the "developments and refinements in language of diversity policy have resulted in ahistorical, disembodied and depoliticised approaches to inclusion"[6] which have further entrenched 'institutional whiteness'[7] by tokenising the presence of diversity workers, eventually leaving them isolated, discriminated and silenced.

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[1] Throughout the present paper, the expression 'cultural institution' is used in reference to Western-based companies and organisations "with an acknowledged mission to engage in the conservation, interpretation and dissemination of cultural, scientific, and environmental knowledge, and promote activities meant to inform and educate citizens on associated aspects of culture, history, science and the environment." (Riches Resources, "Cultural institutions.").

[2] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

[3] Jemma Desai, *This Work isn't For Us* (2020), accessed June 5, 2022, https://heystacks.org/doc/337/this-work-isnt-for-us--by-jemma-desai.

[4] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 7.

[5] Ibid., 16.

[6] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[7] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 33.

In the present essay, I propose to frame such diversity policies through the lens of *extractivism*, with the aim of demonstrating how these initiatives are mere instruments for the extraction of *diversity value* from cultural practitioners embodied in difference. I thus insert my research into the scholarly framework that attempts to conceptually broaden the literal meaning of the notion of extractivism outside its traditional reference to mass-scale industrial extraction of non-renewable natural resources[8]. In cultural studies, extractivism (or *extraction*) is conceived as both an ideology and a practice that cuts across "patterns of human cooperation and social activity"[9]. More precisely, in the words of Laura Junka-Aikio et al., extraction is "an analytical and also political concept that enables the examination and articulation of deeper underlying logics of exploitation and subjectification that are central to the present conjuncture of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism."[10]. Moreover, I couple the concept of extraction with that of *externalisation*, as sociologically framed by Stephan Lessenich. As the author contends, a sociology of externalisation is useful for addressing "the interlinked and relational structure of inequality"[11] that inform our modern, globalised and capitalist society, for it points to the fact that capitalism always already depends "on the existence of an 'exterior' that it can appropriate"[12]. In a similar manner, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson contend that "the scope and directedness of extraction points towards an outside that sustains and enables these operations"[13]. Starting from these premises, I proceed by analysing how, in the context of diversity policies, such an outside is created by cultural institutions through the disembodied language of diversity they employ in such documents – a preparatory work that sets the ground for extraction to occur. Subsequently, I examine how the diversity value extracted from cultural workers embodied in difference is incorporated by the institution in order to uphold systemic whiteness. Finally, in the third and last section, I illustrate how the human and social costs of such extractive mechanisms are externalised by cultural institutions and burdened on diversity workers.

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[8] Laura Junka-Aikio and Catalina Cortes-Severino, "Cultural studies of extraction," *Cultural Studies* 31, nos. 2-3 (2017): 177.

[9] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "On the multiple frontiers of extraction: excavating contemporary capitalism," *Cultural Studies* 31, nos. 2-3 (2017): 194.

[10] Junka-Aikio et al., "Cultural studies of extraction," 177.

[11] Stephan Lessenich, "Externalization: A Relational Perspective on Social Inequality," in *Living Well at Others' Expense: The Hidden Costs of Western Prosperity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 25.

[12] Ibid., 27.

[13] Mezzadra et al., "On the multiple frontiers of extraction," 200.

I. Externalising the Racialised Other: The Disembodied Language of Diversity Policies.

The extractive dimension of diversity policies is to be located in the very language white cultural institutions employ in such documents to shape their idea of 'diversity'. As anticipated, every extractive project always implicates an externalisation process based on the construction of an outside from which value is drawn. In the case of cultural institutions, I argue that such operation begins in what Desai defines as the 'disembodied diversity language'[14] employed in the policy plan, and that such procedure is fundamental for the commodification and exploitation of diversity. More accurately, in their diversity policies, cultural institutions appropriate and empty the concept of diversity from its historical and political meaning[15]. Diversity is then re-conceptualised as a monolithic, racialised category which essentially functions as a substitute for that of *race*.

The narrative subtending the concept of diversity as employed in these policies can be better clarified by observing how the racialised category of *blackness* has been historically constructed. In *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe defines racism as a "site of a rupture"[16] between inside and outside, in which the Other is rendered as "the absence of the same"[17]. In other words, set in opposition to the neutralised category of *whiteness*, blackness is conceptualised in negative terms as that which is 'non-white'. Mbembe describes the 'Western consciousness of Blackness' as a narrative based on "inventing, telling, repeating, and creating variations on the formulas, texts, and rituals whose goal was to produce the Black Man as a racial subject and site of savage *exteriority*"[18] [my emphasis]. Likewise, diversity policies narrates diversity as an external, embodied property that is perceived in opposition to the norm – i.e. *whiteness*. In short, for diversity to be extracted, it must first be rendered visible; as bell hooks writes in "Eating the Other": "The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms."[19].

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[14] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[15] As attributed to it by queer, feminist, de-/postcolonial, and critical black race theorists.

[16] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 32.

[17] Ibid., 17.

[18] Ibid., 28.

[19] bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 370.

The disembodied language of diversity policies is thus fundamental for cultural institutions to be able to extract, commodify and exploit diversity. As hooks powerfully argues: "the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization."[20]. During this act of appropriation – not dissimilar from the one on which colonialism and imperialism were structured – the externalised Other thus ceases to be human and is transformed into a commodity – that is, an "exploitable object"[21] – from which what I propose to name *diversity value* is extracted. In the case of cultural institutions, the commodified Others are those cultural workers embodied in this racialised category of diversity who are hired for implementing the diversity policy the institution has committed to.

In "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology", Sarah Mayorga-Gallo employs the expression 'diversity as commodity' in reference to "the treatment of Asian, Black, Latinx, and Native peoples as objects rather than humans for the benefit and satisfaction of others, namely White people."[22]. Such commodification of the otherness of racial-ethnic minorities is one of the tenants the author identifies as fundamental to the logic of 'diversity ideology' – namely, the "dominant racial ideology of White people who consider themselves progressive and perhaps even antiracist, yet enact practices and policies that perpetuate systemic Whiteness"[23]. Diversity ideology highlights race and other axes of difference for it is based on a rationale that "frames exclusion as the cause of racial inequity and fair representation as the solution"[24]. Diversity as commodity can be approached as symptomatic of the neoliberal and capitalistic values on which our contemporary "society of exhibition"[25] is based on. According to Byung-Chul Han, in such society you "must be displayed in order to be"[26], for

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[20] Ibid., 373.

[21] Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 18.

[22] Sarah Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," *American Behavioral Scientist* 63 (2019): 10.

[23] Ibid, 3.

[24] Ibid., 5.

[25] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015), 9.

[26] Ibid., 9.

everything is measured by its exhibition value[27] – in other words, things exist thanks only to the attention they produce[28]. Cultural institutions' emphasis on visible representation is thus instrumental for elevating their status within the market economy: as "[t]he staging of display alone generates value"[29], the more racialised bodies are included in the organisation, the more the latter accumulates 'diversity value' – that is, the more it appears 'diverse', 'inclusive', and thus 'progressive'. Diversity value is extracted from the racialised bodies of cultural practitioners, commodified and put on display for others to see; ultimately, these workers are transformed in disembodied simulacra of change and progress: "in institutionally white spaces we come to embody not our own bodies, but simply, difference."[30].

Stark evidence of such disembodied diversity language can be found in the fact that policy plans and reports are obsessively riddled with data and statistics, whereas no account is given regarding the embodied experiences of cultural workers and practitioners[31]. As Desai explains, such numbers serve the institution "to measure their progress towards 'innovation' or 'change'"[32], thus figuring as proof that "the 'limited supply' of people embodied in difference"[33] has been addressed. In other words, these statistics of progress – completely disembodied from "the lived experiences of those struggling"[34] – stand as tokens of the diversity value the institution has accumulated.

Before delving into the dynamics underlying the externalisation process by discussing the consequences of rendering cultural practitioners completely disembodied, in the following section I outline how the supposed clarity and neutrality of these 'happy' numbers, and the disembodied and depoliticised conceptualisation of diversity underlying them, are used to denies and obscures the very political manoeuvre behind them – namely, the fact that "systemic Whiteness is reinscribed."[35].

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[27] Ibid., 11.

[28] Ibid., 9.

[29] Ibid., 11.

[30] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 2.

II. A Tokenistic, Non-Performative Change: Reifying Institutional Whiteness.

After having analysed how the extractive project of cultural institutions is inscribed in the very disembodied language used in their diversity policies, in the present section I explore how the diversity value extracted from cultural workers is transposed on the institution itself. The purpose it to demonstrate how such operation is functional to the fabrication of a favourable and neutral perception of white identity, which generates impressions of change and progress while discrimination and inequalities are invisibilised and institutional whiteness is reified.

Diversity policies promote a transparent and positive narrative of progress that is defined by Ahmed as the 'happy talk' of diversity – namely, "a way of telling a happy story of the institution that is at once a story of the institution as happy"[36]. According to the author, such happy talks are used by cultural institutions as evidence – that is, "a way of saying, or of showing, that something has been done."[37]. The author defines such merely tokenistic statements of commitment as 'non-performative', for they are not followed by an action – that is, they do not bring about the effects they name[38]. Commitments to humanist principles, such as equity and justice, diversity and anti-racism, are uttered precisely because they "do not commit institutions to a course of action"[39]. Indeed, rather than challenging a system of structural inequity, "having a policy becomes a substitute for action"[40], for these commitments shift the focus to the good intentions of the institution[41]. These happy talks of diversity – adorned with the previously-mentioned disembodied data and statistics – become devices to disavow racism and discrimination and maintain institutional whiteness.

Such deceitful narratives can be observed as instances of what Lessenich indicates as the 'habitus' of our externalization society – namely, "a system of attitudes and orientations typically connected with the position of a person or group of people in a given structure of unequal social positions, and which typically influences the social actions of this person or

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[36] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 10.

[37] Sara Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies* 16 (2016): 6.

[38] Ibid., 1.

[39] Ibid., 1.

[40] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 11.

[41] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 9.

group of people."[42]. Externalisation habitus are habitual practices employed in order to render "both the individual and collective externalizing processes seem appropriate, self-evident and legitimate"[43] – thus, in our case, as a way to justify the extraction of diversity value. Such practice can be linked to the notion of 'diversity as intent' – another tenet of Mayorga-Gallo's diversity ideology – a rationale which centres "[w]hite feelings, intentions, and self-identification rather than the material conditions of marginalized peoples"[44]. In his groundbreaking work on 'white fragility', Robin DiAngelo explains that:

> In a white supremacist context, white identity in large part rests upon a foundation of (superficial) racial toleration and acceptance. Whites who position themselves as liberal often opt to protect what they perceive as their moral reputations, rather than recognize or change their participation in systems of inequity and domination.[45]

Discourses around inclusivity and diversity are thus strategically instrumentalised by white people who consider themselves progressive, tolerant, or even just anti-racist, in order to modify the perception of whiteness and construct a positive white identity[46]. The inclusion of disembodied cultural practitioner thus benefits the very instigators of the activity: it functions as an hyper-visible performance of benevolent investment and self-congratulation[47], which absolve the organisation's employees from their racist biases and comfort them to be open-minded and welcoming, while picturing the organisation as progressive, innovative, and cutting-edge[48]. Indeed, diversity policies are developed as long as "they coalesce with norms of profitability and corporate power"[49], and the extraction of diversity value is profitable because it can be used to sponsor what Ahmed names 'narratives of repair', which enable cultural institutions' reputation to be recovered from the damage of racism and inequality[50].

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[42] Lessenich, "Externalization," 41.

[43] Ibid., 47.

[44] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 8.

[45] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no.3 (2011): 64.

[46] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 11.

[47] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[48] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 6.

[49] Ibid., 12.

[50] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 17.

Diversity value is that which allows the structuring inequality principle of the cultural sector – namely, institutional whiteness – to be simultaneously denied and replicated[51]. When put on display, the bodies of diversity practitioners "provide an opportunity to cosmetically 'diversify'"[52] the institution whilst allowing racism and inequalities to be overlooked[53]. In other words, through their disembodied, happy talks of diversity, cultural institutions do not "need to change such entrenched practices that created the need for the scheme in the first place"[54] and are thus able to invisibly preserve the structurally unequal status quo of white supremacy[55]. As Lessenich clarifies: "The power inequality and exploitation dynamic are effectively implemented and stabilized by the specific habitus of the exploiters acting from positions of power."[56]. From this perspective, as Ahmed argues, a non-performative commitment still entails an action:

> The action being performed is just not the action made explicit by the utterance. So a commitment is still doing something even when it is not committing something. […] Many actions might be necessary in order for something not to be done or for an attempt to transform something not to lead to a transformation of something. And the reproduction of an existing order might depend on the failure to modify that order.[57]

Eventually, power is reasserted in the very moment it figures it has been dismantled[58]. Diversity policies become habitus for reproducing whiteness "as that which exists but is no longer perceived"[59]. Thus, the very instruments presented to address inequality actually entrench institutional whiteness, while "the conditions which unfairly marginalise new entrants go unaddressed and are invisibilised as 'problems'"[60]. In the following section, I turn precisely to the concealed social and psychological effects that the extraction and exhibition of diversity value through disembodied diversity policies have on cultural practitioners.

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[51] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 14.

[54] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[55] Mayorga-Gallo, "The White-Centering Logic of Diversity Ideology," 3.

[56] Lessenich, "Externalization," 42.

[57] Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words," 2

[58] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 13.

[59] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 34.

[60] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

III. The Disembodiment of Diversity Practitioners.

After having addressed how the extractive mechanism underlying diversity policies enables cultural institutions to (non-performatively) reify institutional whiteness, in the present section I focus on the human and social cost of extracting and exhibiting diversity value from cultural workers. By pointing at how the consequences of the replication of systemic whiteness and habitual discriminatory practices are externalised by the institution and burdened on diversity workers in the form of alienation and psychological and emotional distress, my purpose it to give a concrete account of what does it mean for diversity practitioners to be disembodied.

As previously mentioned, the externalisation dynamic underpinning every extractive mechanism is based on an asymmetrical relational structure in which "the power of some and the powerlessness of others, the benefits for some and the disadvantages for others, the opportunities for some and the risks for others, our own lives and the lives of others"[61] are intimately connected. That is to say that, in our externalisation society, holding the power implies having "the opportunity for transferring the costs of one's way of life to others"[62], for privileges can be maintained only through this inequality. Translated to our case, this entails that the price of the formerly-outlined profits that the extraction of diversity value secures to cultural institutions must be borne by the externalised, racialised others – i.e., cultural workers embodied in difference.

After entering the door of white institutions, diversity practitioners are isolated and treated as 'space invaders' – that is, "a way of experiencing spaces as if they are not reserved for us"[63]. Whilst undergoing several quotidian discriminatory practices, these workers simultaneously face an intense resistance to their practical attempts to implement the policy plan[64]. Ahmed emblematically renders such a phenomenon under the expression 'wall encounters', where the wall stands "as evidence of what a commitment does not do"[65]. To those workers who do not seek to bring about transformation, the wall does not appear: "To

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[61] Lessenich, "Externalization," 33.

[62] Ibid., 42.

[63] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 13.

[64] Ibid., 17.

[65] Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words," 7.

come up against institutional walls is to come up against what others do not see"[66]. Consequently, diversity practitioners are experienced as 'wall makers' – or, alternatively, 'institutional killjoy'[67]: "as they observe the whiteness and react to it, they come to draw attention to the whiteness, but it's "insidious", hard to hear, they are told its nothing, perhaps they imagined it."[68]. Such dissent is contained by the organisation through the constant reminder that their job position is a unique chance that could be withdrawn at any moment[69]. This status as special 'guest' – that is, as "temporary residents in someone else's home"[70] – generates a sense of vulnerability while simultaneously creating the pressure of having to show gratitude: "Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on condition that you give something back in return."[71]. In short, the terms of such a conditional offer of inclusion are based on an implicit contract which "hinges on fitting in and being quiet"[72].

In the long run, the psychological burdens of discrimination, isolation, and precariousness have a de-politicising effect that slowly leads diversity workers to accept such unequal conditions: "fitting in'– is granted in exchange for the loss of being able to imagine something different."[73]. Silenced and disempowered, yet still placed on the "ethical frontline"[74], they become complicit in the fictional, disembodied practice of 'doing diversity' and 'promoting equality' and, consequently, accessory in the exacerbation of their own marginalisation, as well as in the reification of racism[75]. In other words, diversity practitioners are gradually assimilated to "the norms of whiteness"[76], a phenomenon that could be rendered as the 'becoming white of cultural workers' – to paraphrase Mbembe. Alternatively, the psychological impact of such structurally created barriers leads many diversity workers to choose to leave the industries they have entered, while perceiving such a decision as a form of

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[66] Ibid., 7.

[67] Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words," 9.

[68] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 43.

[71] Ibid., 43.

[72] Desai, *This Work isn't For Us*.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

weakness[77]. As Desai explains: “Any failure to enjoy this lucky opportunity, cannot but be placed within ourselves, as anxiety, stress, illness rather than directed toward where it belongs – in the problematic and ineffective institutional thinking around diversity that has placed us there.”[78].

Whichever of the mentioned scenarios might be applied, in each case cultural practitioners face isolation, psychological distress, and profound alienation, while their “ability to collectivise or even imagine better futures is fragmented and threatened”[79]. Presented as politically progressive, such poorly conceived and dubiously motivated diversity policies merely offer these workers a conditional inclusion based on contortions and constrictions, thus endorsing “social dynamics that continue to uphold institutional whiteness and racism”[80]. Disavowed by other workers, the externalised burdens of the “real, often painful, embodied experiences of the contortions of ‘diversity’ policy”[81] end-up having what Nora Samaran defines a ‘gaslighting effect’ – namely, a mismatch between narrative and reality grounded in the feeling that your own perceptions, instincts, and intuitions cannot be trusted[82]. Ultimately, the inclusion of diversity practitioners stands as “a mental and emotional act of domination”[83], whose externalised cost is deeply psychologically harmful for it makes diversity practitioners feel completely disembodied and disconnected from their lived experience, historical or future agency[84]. As Desai perfectly renders: “in the process of shaking something the instability becomes embodied in you. In the process of shaking, things fall over before they have taken root, stronger clearer new shoots fail to grow.”[85].

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Nora Samaran, cited in: Desai, *This Work isn’t For Us*.

[83] Lessenich, “Externalization,” 49.

[84] Desai, *This Work isn’t For Us*.

[85] Ibid.

Conclusions.

When applied to cultural studies, extractivism provides a theoretical framework that facilitates the understanding of invisible and apparently contradictory phenomena, as shown with diversity policies. By turning a critical eye on such initiatives, it has been possible to highlight how the extraction of diversity value from cultural workers embodied in difference enables cultural institutions to exhibit a tokenistic, emptied diversity while insidiously reify systemic institutional whiteness. Starting from the use in their policy of a disembodied language that constructs diversity as an ahistorical, depoliticised and racialised category, white institutions externalise cultural workers through processes of dehumanisation and commodification that render their embodied diversity a mineable value. The human and social cost of such an extractive process are internalised by diversity practitioners in the form of a profound psychological damage that renders them completely disembodied, detached and alienated from their lived reality, as well as totally disenchanted about future improvements. Conversely, by accounting for the real, embodied experiences of cultural workers, autoethnographic and ethnographic works such as those of Ahmed and Desai render starkly visible the institutional walls that prevent the concrete inclusion of marginalised cultural practitioners, as well as the harm of ideologically-driven rhetoric of diversity – thereby allowing to acknowledge "how whiteness *feels* and lands in different bodies"[86]. Such personal, resilient accounts reanimate the emptied word of diversity by linking it with social justice[87], thus re-empowering cultural workers and giving them the opportunity to re-discover and strengthen their embodied voices.

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words," 3.

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