

## **Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists**

Sara Ahmed\*

*Goldsmith's College, University of London, UK*

This paper examines some of the problems and paradoxes of embodying diversity for organisations. With reference to a research project based on interviews with diversity practitioners, as well as personal experience of working within universities as a Black feminist, this paper explores how diversity becomes a commitment that requires that those who embody that diversity express happiness and gratitude. Our very arrival into organisations is used as evidence that the whiteness of which we speak no longer exists. Most importantly to embody diversity can mean to be under pressure not to speak about racism. The very talk about racism is seen as introducing bad feeling into organisations. Drawing on the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, the paper argues that we need to reclaim the figure of the angry Black feminist, and that we need to refuse the injunction to be happy objects for the organisation, which means being willing to cause trouble and being prepared to stay as sore as our points.

**Keywords:** racism; diversity; emotion; Black feminism

What does it mean to embody diversity? This is a question I have learnt to ask myself over time. It is an unsettling question. The turn to diversity is often predicated on the numbers game, on getting more of us, more people of colour, to add colour to the white faces of organisations. So if we are the colour, then we are what gets added on. Whiteness: the world as is it coheres around certain bodies. We symbolise the hope or promise that whiteness is being undone.

Our arrival is read as evidence of commitment, of change, of progress. Our arrival is noticeable. I am speaking of whiteness in a seminar and someone in the audience says, 'but you are a professor', as if to say if Black women 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 was their undoing. I was appointed to teach 'the race course', I reply. I am the only person of colour employed on a full-time basis in the department. I hesitate. It becomes too personal. The argument is too much to sustain when your body is so exposed, when you feel so noticeable. I stop, and do not complete my answer to the question.

When our appointments and promotion are taken up as signs of organisational 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 racism 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

---

\*Email: s.ahmed@gold.ac.uk

the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival. It is this very structural position of being the guest, or the stranger, the one who receives hospitality, which keeps us in certain places, even when you move up. Diversity becomes both a problem and a paradox for those who embody diversity. This paper contributes to the growing literature on what diversity might mean specifically for Black feminism (Mirza 2006; Jones 2006).

What's my story? Like you, I have many. I started out as an academic in a 'very white' university in the northwest of England. I was in Women's Studies, having applied for a job in 'Black feminism'. The amazement of getting that job; the amazement of there being that job to get. And yet, it was not comfortable, far from it. They interviewed four Black feminists for that job. The audience at the talks was all white. We socialised afterwards, the four of us standing out in a house amongst white people. Even the carpets were white: no red wine allowed, as if to say, no colour permitted that will leave a stain. We were shimmering colour in all that whiteness. Standing out like a sore thumb, you might say. To stand out is to be sore point, before anything can happen. The desire for you to embody diversity (which can feel like a desire both for you and for what you embody) comes from the right place (race needs to be made integral to women's studies, the core course should be on race). And yet it creates its sore points. If you embody race for them, then they do race through you, which can be a way of not doing race. You can also express their commitment to the very idea of intersectionality. You are the point where the lines meet. A meeting point becomes a sore point.

I am co-director of the Institute for Women's Studies. We can't really do much about race equality says the Dean in a meeting with Heads of Departments. Rage can interpellate us; it can get through even our best defences. It's too difficult, he says. I send him an email. Saying that you can't do anything about it is how racism gets reproduced, I say. The belief that racism is inevitable is how racism becomes inevitable, I point out. (One of the favourite arguments made by senior management was that the university was 'very white' because of its geography - and that you can't do anything about geography.) Do something about it, he says. It shouldn't be up to me, I reply. And yet, I cannot stay silent. I speak out, I speak up. How quickly we can be interpellated: it is the right reasons that get us there, even if that's not where we wish to get.

Having spoken up, I end up on the race equality team. I am doing something, and of course I am glad about that, but it is an uneasy gladness. We are writing a race equality policy. There are two academics on the team, both Black and Minority Ethnic, or BME as they like to call us. We write the policy. In discussions amongst our group, we take as our starting point that we need a policy because of inequalities, because of whiteness, because of the hard work of challenging sedimented privilege. We talk about how the word 'diversity' isn't very challenging, and we use other words alongside this word, stickier words as I would describe them, like 'racism', 'whiteness' and 'inequality'. We submit our policy. According to the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), the university 'does well'. We are good at race equality, says the new vice chancellor, his face beaming, as he addresses university staff at a meeting. I did not share the good feeling. The documents that document racism are used as a measure of good performance. When race equality becomes a performance indicator you know you are in trouble.

I am director. We are always at the end of a line, struggling, as a Women's Studies department, for the right to exist. We are the Jewel in the Crown, says the Dean, at the

same time that he announces that we won't get any 'new blood posts' and that we have to leave our large offices at the front of the building for small offices at the back. Never quite viable, no matter what you do. Not being proper is not just about discipline. To be not proper is not only to lack discipline, but to lack discipline in the wrong way. Anyway, we have to do something. We have to save Women's Studies. Always, it is a saving mission. A rescue mission. Always, you are giving out so much energy for the right to stay. A colleague approaches me from the Management School. She invites me to co-direct a research project on diversity in education, under the auspices of what would become the Centre for Excellence for Leadership (CEL), funded by the Department for Education and Skills. I seize the opportunity. It is a chance and it feels like a lifeline. Rescuing Women's Studies took me there (unfortunately that part of it did not work), and the world of diversity was opened up. As a text-based researcher by training, I embraced new techniques (talking to people, going to events with the task of documenting the event for others). I was taught important lessons about how institutional worlds as life worlds take shape around some bodies and not others.

This paper presents what I learnt from doing this research project, which is to say, what I learnt from re-inhabiting the diversity world as a Black feminist. I interviewed 20 diversity practitioners in British and Australian universities. In the UK, I attended numerous conferences on diversity and race equality set up by organisations such as the Commission for Race Equality (CRE). And I worked as a member of a term, a diversity team. What I want to explore in the paper will draw on my research but also on my own experience as being a member of this team. What happened to the research became a mirror for what the research was about: the unhappy consequences of embodying diversity. It was the experience of doing this research project that led me to writing about happiness and the politics of 'happy diversity' (Ahmed 2008), as well as to reflect more on the emotional work of diversity work. This paper amounts to a series of rather scattered reflections from the field. To scatter is the right kind of verb for this kind of work: to scatter is to throw here and there, as well as to disperse. The field of diversity is a field that is dispersed, where things are scattered, and where we do not quite know how to inhabit its ground.

### **Doing diversity**

The diversity world is a world that coheres around diversity. As a word, we could say, the word 'diversity' does things. The word diversity appears in documents that document the university as having a certain existence. Race equality documents (such as the one I was involved in writing) often describe the university not only as having certain principles, but also as having certain qualities, characteristics and styles. Through such documents, universities are constituted as if they have these qualities. 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 organisation.

Take the following opening sentence from a race equality policy: 'The University values the richness of the diversity of its students, staff and members of the local communities in which it operates'. The language of valuing diversity is of course mainstream, and hesitates between discourses of economic value (the business case for diversity) and moral value (the social justice case). This model of diversity reifies difference as something that already exists 'in' the bodies of others (we are diverse because you are here). Our difference becomes their diversity. It is this model of

diversity as something others bring to the organisation which we can see at work in the use of visual images of diverse organisations: images of ‘colourful’ happy faces, which show the diversity of the university as something it has embraced.

Diversity is cited in documents that describe educational missions, and becomes a way of imagining organisations as having certain attributes. It is also a term that is used within organisations by diversity and equality practitioners. How do practitioners mobilise the language of diversity? How does the institutional desire for diversity relate to what practitioners do? Many practitioners are very critical of how diversity is used by their organisations. 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 its 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 less to do. I ask another practitioner why she thinks that the word ‘diversity’ is appealing. She argued that it is 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. As such, 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 brand, and a form of organisational pride. Not only does this re-branding of the university as being diverse work to conceal racism, but it also works to re-imagine the university as being anti-racist and even beyond race: as if the colours of different races have ‘integrated’ to create a new hybrid or even 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 given how diversity might make people feel good, that it can be a useful term, as it allows people in: once they are ‘in’, by implication, then we can do different things, or even use a different set of terms. It is precisely how diversity might work to conceal racism that might make it a term that can do things. Indeed, most practitioners describe their work as a question of ‘what works’, of using whatever language works for the different audiences they speak to. Diversity is used by some precisely because it’s a ‘cuddly’ term, which allows people to engage more easily with this kind of work. In other words, the

appeal of the term for organisations might be what makes the term useful *as an appeal* for practitioners.

But what kind of appeal does diversity make? And what is the relation between diversity and whiteness? In one of my interviews, we discussed a research project on perceptions of the university that had been funded as part of the university's commitment to race equality. What did the research reveal?

OK yes. It was about uncovering perceptions um, about [university] as an employer. ... [university] 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 [university] 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 [university].

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 [university] so we have to try to achieve you know, we have to try to make the [university] an attractive employer.

The politics of diversity has become about what we could call 'image management': diversity work is about generating the 'right image', and correcting the wrong one. I was quite interested in what it meant to be shocked by this image, given what I knew of the staffing profile of this university. What organises this shock is the presumption that the perception is what is wrong. According to this logic, people have the 'wrong perception' when they see the organisation as white, elite, male, old-fashioned. In other words, what is behind the shock is a belief that that the organisation does not have these qualities: that whiteness is 'in the image' rather than 'in the organisation'. Diversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations*. Doing well, or a good performance, would then be about being perceived as a diverse organisation.

The term 'diversity' is appealing as it does not necessarily challenge organisational culture, even if it allows a change in appearance. Hence, to add 'diversity' to a mission statement does not necessarily add anything, other than just put an educational mission in different terms. And yet, the word still has baggage, and still gets associated with people who 'look different'. As Nirmal Puwar points out, 'In policy terms, diversity has come overwhelmingly 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 colour to the white face of the university. Rather, insofar as diversity signifies the presence of racial others, then it might expose how organisations are orientated around whiteness, around those who are 'already in place'. The happy smiling face of diversity would not then simply re-brand the university, but point instead to what gets concealed by this very image: the inequalities that are behind it, and which give it its surface appeal.

### **Being diversity**

What does diversity mean for those of us who look different, and who come, in the very terms of our appearance, to embody diversity? What does 'being diversity' do? As I have suggested, diversity can work as a branding exercise, a way of re-imaging

the organisation as ‘being diverse’ through having us, those who embody diversity for them. Diversity becomes a technology of happiness: through diversity, the organisation is represented ‘happily’ as ‘getting along’, as committed to equality, as anti-racist. Your arrival is thus a happy occasion for the organisation. But you must smile – you must express gratitude for having been received. If your arrival is a sign of diversity, then you are a success story. You turn an action point into an outcome.

Our diversity team experienced the consequences of being a turning point. We were as it were an outcome, a tick in the box. We were continually reminded that we were the recipients of generous funding. We were ‘indebted’. The gift economy is a powerful one. In this case, the gift given is used as evidence of the organisation’s commitment to diversity and equality. We had a good team, a mixed team, white and Black feminists working together. Working together and learning from each other, I would say. But as a team we were also an object of desire. We were the ‘diversity team’ *to* them and *for* them. We embodied diversity for the organisation. They want your picture, of course. Photographs of Black and white people working together: these are happy pictures for the organisation. Happy hybridity – that was us, for them.

We are at a meeting for the research projects. The director of the organisation is present. We talk about our research, drawing on our interviews. They are all so interested. We are very committed to diversity, the director says, over and over again. Sometimes the repetition of good sentiment feels oppressive. What are they trying to convince us of? Enthusiasm can be oppressive, I learn. The occasion becomes *about* the enthusiasm of the white management. They have funded us; we rely on their commitment. Each expression of enthusiasm is a reminder of our debt. I know how we are supposed to respond. We are supposed to be grateful. We are supposed to thank them and be humbled by their generosity. We are good objects at this point, but you know it is precarious. You know it is conditional on returning their commitment in the right way. What do they want? Will we do what they want?

Their commitment does come with conditions and the task is to make the conditions explicit. We learnt that the condition of their commitment is that we speak about their commitment in glowing terms and not to speak about anything that exposes the conditions of their commitment. As such, a condition of commitment becomes a demand to use happy words and not to use unhappy words. In one instance, the diversity officer talks to a newspaper, and uses the words ‘institutional racism’. A report follows that uses that word. The director is ‘outraged’ and sends off an email: ‘we would never accuse a college of institutional racism’, she says. I am stunned. Institutional racism is a term used to describe how racism structures organisations, I respond. Of course, there is ‘institutional racism’ in the sector. What have we been talking about? The commitment to diversity gets translated into a prohibition on the use of the word ‘racism’. It is almost as if the reward for organisational diversity is a moratorium on that word. We are suspended from the right to use the term ‘racism’ when organisations have committed to diversity, whatever that commitment says or does.

Racism becomes something bad that we can’t even speak of, as if to describe X as racist is to damage or even hurt X. I had discussed in my earlier work how the language of institutional racism has become psychologising, as if the institution is now the bad person, who needs therapy to get over it, despite the fact that the language of institutional racism was intended to avoid psychological models (Ahmed 2004a). We can see the risk of the psychologising of organisations. The organisation becomes the subject of feeling, the one who must be protected, the one who is easily bruised or

hurt. To speak of racism is to introduce bad feeling. It is to hurt not just the organisation, re-imagined as a subject with feelings, but also the subjects who identify with the organisation, the 'good white diversity' subjects, to whom we are supposed to be grateful. The speech act, 'we would not accuse you of racism' can be translated into, 'I am not racist' insofar as the 'I' that would not accuse the 'you' of racism, has already identified with that 'you' (= happy whiteness).

The word racism is very sticky. Just saying it does things. Constantly, I am witnessing what the word racism does. We speak of racism in a paper, which we give at a research meeting to an audience made up of other project teams. I can feel the discomfort. It is hard to know sometimes whether feelings are in the room or are a matter of our orientation; the impressions we have of the room by virtue of the angle at which we are placed. I feel uncomfortable, let's say that. We stop. Someone asks a question about class. It happens over and over again. We speak about racism, and they ask questions back to us about class. It is not that class does not matter. It is just that they put class in the place of race as the object of shared attention. Not just class but something more specific: they ask the same question about the complicity of middle-class Black professionals almost as if they have to re-imagine Black subjects as the ones with relative privilege. They displace the attention. Discomfort shows the failure to fit.

After this particular session, a white woman from the audience comes up to me and puts her arm next to mine. You wouldn't really know you were any different to me, she says. We are almost the same colour, she says. No difference, no difference. Talk about racism becomes a fantasy that invents difference. She smiles, as if our proximate arms were a kind of solidarity, and I say nothing. Turning away, I want to scream. Being diversity feels like one big scream.

I am speaking to one of my interviewees about racism. We are talking of those little encounters, and their very big effects. It is 'off tape', we are just talking, recognising each other, as you do, in how we recognise racism in those everyday encounters you have with people who can't handle it, the idea of it. That's what they always say; she says to me, you always reduce everything to racism. Racism becomes your paranoia. Of course, it's a way of saying that racism doesn't really exist in the way you say it does. As if we had to invent racism to explain our own feeling of exclusion, as if racism was a way of not being responsible for the places we cannot go. It is a form of racism to say that racism does not exist. We know this.

But I am thinking more about paranoia, and thinking about good reasons for bad feelings. I guess the problem is that I do feel paranoid even if I know that this paranoia is reasonable. I do have a kind of paranoid anxiety about everything. I am never sure when X happens, whether X is about racism is a result of racism. I am never sure. And because I am never sure, because I have never been allowed to be sure, then X is lived as always possibly about racism, as what explains how you inhabit the world you do. Racism creates paranoia, that's what racism does. Whiteness is reproduced both by the fantasy of paranoia (it doesn't 'really' exist), and by the effect of the fantasy of paranoia, which is to make us paranoid. Our feelings become its truth.

We kept speaking about racism. We must, and we do. I think of it as the kernel of our findings: for Black staff in the diversity world, the recognition of the ongoing nature of racism is constantly blocked. Organisations wanted to talk about diversity *rather than* racism. Diversity becomes a technology for not hearing. We 'need to hear' about good practice, as hearing about good practice is good practice (people are better if they feel better). We need to be useful. We need to tell people what to do. We need

took-kits and bullet points. We need to hear about positive experiences. The underlying assumption was that we have to focus on what is good for things to get better. But what if ‘the good’ – good feeling, good practice, positive stories – is what makes keeps our attention away from what is bad, from what hurts, from what gets under the skin, that big scream that you never quite manage to make. In order to avoid people feeling bad, we have to make them feel good, by speaking about diversity. Our hurt and rage is blanketed under the warmth of diversity.

We keep speaking about racism. It never amounted to screaming, but it was the closest we could get. We write our report. We offered critiques of good practice. We said no to tool-boxes, and gave accounts of racism. It doesn’t take long for the enthusiasm to shift into hostility. The director is ‘disappointed’ in the diversity research. We need more ‘positive stories’. There is too much theory. There is too much focus on racism (surely you are exaggerating, how can there be so much?). The attacks feel personal. We are constantly targeted, singled out, made into a case. They never publish our report.<sup>1</sup>

I was so angry. I wrote so many letters. I never sent them. It was a reasonable anger, but I experienced what some of the practitioners I spoke to call ‘the brick wall’; you come up against the organisation, and all that happens is that you get sore. The wall keeps its place, so it is you that gets sore. Embodying diversity is a sore point for Black feminists, but the soreness of that point is either hidden from their view (if we go along with the happiness of the image, which sometimes we must do) or attributed to us (as if we talk about walls because we are sore). So yes, diversity is a happy image, of people who ‘look different’ just getting along. Happiness becomes a condition of membership: you have to be happy *for them*. You cannot speak about racism; that’s too unhappy as it causes them to lose their right to happiness, resting as it is on an ego ideal of being good and tolerant. You certainly should not speak of whiteness, which would implicate them in the force of your critique. You have to stay in the right place to keep your place. Can we do something with the sore points?

### **Angry Black feminists**

Doing and being diversity work taught me about the distribution of good and bad feeling. Some bodies are assumed to be the origin of bad feeling, as getting in the way of the good feelings of others. This is why when I hear people say ‘the bad feeling is coming from “this person” or “that person”’ I am never convinced. My scepticism is shaped by life long experiences of being an outspoken Black feminist, at odds with the performance of good feeling, whether at home or at work, always assumed to be bringing others down, for example, by pointing out sexism or racism in other people’s talk.

Let’s take the figure of the ‘killjoy feminist’. Does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings get brought to the surface in a certain way?

There is a relationship between the negativity of certain figures and how certain bodies are encountered as being negative. Marilyn Frye argues that oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself. As she puts it, ‘it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signify our docility and our



acquiescence in our situation' (Frye 1983, 2). To be oppressed requires you show signs of happiness, as signs of being or having been adjusted. As a result, for Frye, 'anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous' (1983, 2). For an oppressed person not to smile or to show a sign of being happy is to already be recognised as negative: as angry, hostile, unhappy, and so on. I suspect Frye is describing a very familiar situation for many of us. You are 'already read' as 'not easy to get along with' when you name yourself as a feminist. Frye herself alludes to such experiences, when she says, 'This means, at the very least, that we may be found to be "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one's livelihood' (1983, 2–3).

Of course, within feminism, some bodies more than others can be attributed as the cause of unhappiness. We can place the figure of the feminist killjoy alongside the figure of the angry Black woman, explored so well by writers such as Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (2000), and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003). The angry Black woman can be described as a killjoy; she may even kill feminist joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics. She might not even have to make any such point to kill joy. Listen to the following description from bell hooks:

a group of white feminist activists who do not know one another may be present at a meeting to discuss feminist theory. They may feel bonded on the basis of shared womanhood, but the atmosphere will noticeably change when a woman of color enters the room. The white woman will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory. (2000, 56)

It is not just that feelings are 'in tension', but that the tension is located somewhere: in being felt by some bodies, it is attributed as caused by another body, who thus comes to be felt as apart from the group, as getting in the way of its enjoyment and solidarity. The Black body is attributed as the cause of becoming tense, which is also the loss of a shared atmosphere. hooks shows how as a Black feminist you do not even have to say anything to cause tension. The mere proximity of some bodies involves an affective conversion. To get along you have to go along with things that might mean for some not even being able to enter the room.

To speak out of anger as Black woman is then to confirm your position as the cause of tension. Black woman's anger gets in the way of the social bond; it injures or hurts the feminist group. As Audre Lorde describes: 'When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are "creating a mood of helplessness", "preventing white women from getting past guilt", or "standing in the way of trusting communication and action"' (1984, 131). The exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence. The Black woman must let go of her anger for the white woman to move on.

Some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops. Our anger becomes a blockage point. We need to say 'yes' here. We need to say, yes, Black people are angry: we are angry about racism, about forms of violence and power that are hidden under the signs of civility and love. We are angry and yet Black anger is also a fantasy that allows the dismissal of what we might have to say. Your reasonable thoughtful arguments are dismissed as anger (which of course empties anger of its own reason), which makes you angry, such that your response becomes read as the confirmation of the evidence that you are not only angry but also unreasonable!

To put this in another way, our anger is attributed. So you might be angry *about* how racism and sexism diminish life choices for women of colour. Your anger is a

judgement that something is wrong. But then in being heard as angry, your speech is read as motivated by anger. Your anger is read as unattributed, as if you are against x because you are angry rather than being angry because you are against X. You become angry at the injustice of being heard as motivated by anger, which makes it harder to separate yourself from the object of your anger. You become entangled with what you are angry about because you are angry about how they have entangled you in your anger. In becoming angry about that entanglement, you confirm their commitment to your anger as the truth ‘behind’ your speech, which is what blocks your anger, stops it from getting through.

Political work becomes harder when your feelings become proximate to their fantasy. Recently, I published a paper on whiteness in the journal *Feminist Theory*, which also included a paper by Suneri Thobani (2007).<sup>2</sup> I had previously written about Thobani’s important critiques of the war against terrorism and the politics of how she was dismissed as an angry Black woman (Ahmed 2004b). In this special issue, Thobani’s paper offered a critique of work by Phyllis Chesler, Zilla Eisenstein, and Judith Butler for it is complicit with imperialism (albeit in very different ways). The journal publishes alongside her paper a response from Chesler. I cannot believe they could publish this kind of response by a white feminist to a Black feminist in a special issue of a feminist journal on whiteness. The response draws on racist vocabularies with quite extraordinary ease. I go from disbelief to shock to rage. And then resignation. It will be a good pedagogic tool, I say to a Black feminist colleague at a conference. It will show students how racism works in academic practices. I don’t convince myself. I know very well we have no need for any such tools. We have too many already.

What does Chesler say? First, she points to the fact that Thobani is critiquing ‘three Jewish feminists’ (2007, 227, emphasis hers), creating the implication that Thobani’s critique is motivated by anti-semitism. She describes Thobani’s paper as ‘ideological, not scholarly’ (228) and as trying ‘to pass for an academic or even intellectual work’ (228). She describes the paper as an ‘angry and self-righteous declaration of war’ (228). She suggests “‘white” folk have sorrows too’ and then argues that Thobani ‘is perfectly free to criticise, even to demonize the West, *in* the West because she is living in a democracy where academic freedom and free speech are (still) taken seriously’ (230). The familiarity of these kinds of statements is exhausting. When I read it, I just thought of Audre Lorde, and how I wished she was here to help us describe the moment. Even description gets hard at this point.

The Black woman isn’t a real scholar, she is motivated by ideology. The Black woman is angry. She occupies the moral high ground. The Black woman declares war by pointing to the complicity of white feminists in imperialism. The Black woman is racist (and we hurt too). The Black woman should be grateful, as she lives in our democracy. We have given her the right to speak. The Black woman is the origin of terror, and she fails to recognise violence other than the violence of whites against Black. After reading Chesler’s response to Thobani, I turned to her book, *The New Anti-Semitism*. One sentence more than any other got under my skin: ‘I have known utterly charming, truly enchanting Muslims. *Yes, prick them and they will bleed*’ (2003, 15, emphasis mine). Racist speech is most powerful in such expressions of love: the Muslims bleed, yes, which seems a way of saying they are human, but implies quite the opposite: there must be a doubt that they are not human, for it to be even a question as to whether ‘they will bleed’, like we do. The doubt as to whether ‘they will bleed’ is the instrument of violence, of the will to make them bleed. ‘*Yes, prick them and they will bleed*’.

Witnessing Chesler's response to Thobani teaches us about racism and the politics of anger. In a way, we might learn to claim and validate our anger, even as we appreciate how anger is then read in a way that blocks being heard. Within Black feminism, the passion of anger is crucial to what gives us 'the energy' to react against the deep investments that exist in forms of racism as well as sexism. Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Audre Lorde, specifically in her critiques of racism against Black women. As she writes so powerfully:

My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger ignoring it, feeding it, learning to use it, before it laid my visions to waste for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing... Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification... Anger is loaded with information and energy. (1984, 127)

Here, anger is constructed in different ways: as a response to the injustice of racism; as a vision of the future; as a translation of pain into knowledge; and as being loaded with information and energy. Crucially, anger is not simply defined in relationship to a past, but as opening up the future. In other words, being against something does not end with 'that which one is against'. Anger can open the world up. Lorde has talked precisely of how white feminists refuse to hear her anger by returning this anger in the form of defensiveness (1984, 124). Angry Black women need to stay angry: even though speaking anger involves risks and costs, even when we fail to get through other people's defences. This is not to say that we can only be angry – anger is creative, and it gives us room to do other things. And nor is it our duty; I am not obliged to keep hitting that wall, sometimes I will, and sometimes I won't. We learn over time about how to make these decisions, which is a question of how to live in an alien world. Not to speak anger because it is pointless is not the answer. After all, even if we use softer language, we are already sore points. We might as well do things with those points.

Some bodies become sore points. Other bodies become bearers of the promise of happiness; the good white subjects who will offer us their love. Just be happy, they say. Smile, we are catching your image. To embody diversity is to play their game. As my experience being a member of a diversity research team taught me to embody diversity is to be prohibited from even speaking about racism, as if you should just get over it. But we can't get over it. Racism is not something you can get over. We won't get over it. It is not over. To get over it before it is over would be to keep things in place. We must be the trouble they claim us to be: we must persist in being the cause of their trouble. It is time for us to reclaim our place as angry Black feminists even as we inhabit different places. The angry Black feminist, who insists on speaking about racism, who is not happy with diversity, can do things. We don't even know yet just what she can do. We need to be bad at embodying diversity. We need to fail to be happy for them. We need to stay as sore as our points.

## Notes

1. Our report was never published by CEL, and despite numerous emails requesting information about this we were never given any account of this decision. The report can be downloaded from my website: <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-communications/staff/finaldiversityreport.pdf>. Please disseminate widely.
2. When I first read the special issue, I considered writing a letter of protest to the journal. However, in this case, it felt like the wall was too much. I am writing about it now, in a

paper I am writing as a Black feminist for Black feminists. We have to choose when and where to make our points.

## References

- Ahmed, S. 2004a. Declarations of whiteness: The non-performativity of anti-racism. *borderlands* 3, no 2: 1–54.
- Ahmed, S. 2004b. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ahmed, S. 2008. Multiculturalism and the promise of happiness. *New Formations* 63: 121–37.
- Chesler, P. 2003. *The new anti-Semitism: The current crisis and what we must do about it*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chesler, P. 2007. Response. *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2: 227–34.
- Frye, M. 1983. *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.
- hooks, b. 2000. *Feminist theory: From margin to centre*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jones, C. 2006. Falling between the cracks: What diversity means for Black women in the academy. *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no. 2: 145–59.
- Lorde, A. 1984. *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Mirza, H. 2006. Transcendence over diversity: Black women in the academy. *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no 2: 101–13.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. 2003. Tiddas talking up to the white woman: When Huggins et al took on Bell. In *Blacklines: Contemporary critical writing by indigenous Australians*, ed. M. Grossman. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Puwar, N. 2004. *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Oxford: Berg.
- Thobani, S. 2007. White wars: Western feminisms and the ‘War on Terror’. *Feminist Theory* 8, no 2: 169–85.

Copyright of *Race, Ethnicity & Education* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.