

SOCI 309: Food for Thought Assignment

What is the main argument/thesis?

This paper unpacks the empty institutional speech acts, such as those made through official documents and public statements, that are performed by institutions such as universities to hide deeply rooted racism and injustices within the institution.

We should discuss this:

When reading through the “Commitments” section, a key issue that stuck out for me was the tension between institutional statements of commitment, such as equity and diversity policies, and the lack of action that follows. As stated by Ahmed (2006), “A university that commits to antiracism might also be the one that does not recognize racism as an ongoing reality” (pg. 111). Institutions such as universities purposely appear to commit to these policies towards the public, but through this fake commitment, they often cover deeper institutional harmful biases, where institutions might deny or deflect internal racism. With this in mind, my question is: What would a genuinely transformative institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion, such as antiracism, look like? How could it be properly distinguished from an empty statement of commitment?

Commentary:

The “Describing Diversity” section interested me the most, specifically the emphasis on how diversity can become the “politics of feeling good,” ultimately allowing institutions to “relax and feel less threatened” when faced with the question of addressing ongoing inequalities (Ahmed, 2006, pg. 121). As noted on page 120, Ahmed notes that diversity is used as a term of marketing appeal by allowing the university to “sell itself by presenting itself as a happy place, a place where differences are celebrated, welcomed, and enjoyed” (2006). This ultimately allows major institutions, such as universities or the government, to commodify the idea of diversity while allowing racism and marginalization to go unchecked. As a broad example, it made me think of the recent push for corporate diversity initiatives. They are often labelled as progressive and equitable, yet many companies still reproduce systemic inequalities such as pay gaps, racism, sexism, and a lack of representation in career promotions and leadership positions.

Current Event Connection:

In her 2024 news article “Progress too Slow on Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, Advocates Say,” author Katherine Dornian emphasizes the failure of the Canadian government to follow through on critical commitments in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. As Dornian notes, “In June 2024, the Assembly of First Nations reported that only two out of the numerous calls for justice had been fully implemented, with most showing little progress” (Dornian, 2024). This is a clear example of what Ahmed refers to as a nonperformative speech act, a process in which an institution is given attributes or qualities without actually fulfilling them (pg. 104). In this example, the government is portrayed as progressive and decolonial on the surface by proposing the calls to action, when in reality the government can successfully “work” as a speech act because it purposely fails to bring about what it names: Indigenous justice, reconciliation, and proper recognition of its colonial past (Ahmed, 2006, pg. 105).

References

Ahmed, S. (2006). The Nonperformativity of Antiracism. *Meridians (Middletown, Conn.)*, 7(1), 104–126. <https://doi.org/10.2979/MER.2006.7.1.104>

Dornian, K. (2024, June 17). *Progress Too Slow on Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, Advocates Say*. Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/10570109/progress-too-slow-on-truth-and-reconciliation-calls-to-action-advocates-say/>