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Diversity matters: the color, shape, and tone of twenty-first-century diversity

edited by Emily Allen Williams, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, 236pp., \$100.00(hardback), ISBN 978-1-7936-2829-9

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BOOK REVIEW

Diversity matters: the color, shape, and tone of twenty-first-century diversity, edited by Emily Allen Williams, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, 236pp., \$100.00(hardback), ISBN 978-1-7936-2829-9

Diversity has undoubtedly become the quintessential catchphrase of the twenty-first century. From the corporate realm to academia, diversity is promoted as not just a universal ideal but also a profiteering tool, and is increasingly regarded as a sign of organizational success. But the notion is as contested as it is celebrated. Many scholars, myself included, have previously criticized the concept for its myriad of flaws, including its conceptual fuzziness and depoliticizing potential. These critiques notwithstanding, diversity remains a highly relevant topic in our strive towards social justice. In *Diversity Matters; The colour, shape and tone of twenty-first-century diversity*, Emily Allen Williams has gathered a compelling collection of essays that approach diversity from varying and at times contrasting perspectives. In her poetic introduction to the anthology, Williams, quoting a New York Times article, admits that diversity may have become “both euphemism and cliché, a convenient shorthand that gestures at inclusivity and representation without actually taking them seriously” and gone from “communicating something idealistic to something cynical and suspect” (4). However, she remains adamant that diversity matters, emphasizing that “those invested in inclusion, equity and access work must not fall into the big long sleep of social injustice” (4). For Williams, diversity’s shortcomings are remedied by coupling it with the three pillars of inclusion, equity, and access which together constitute the new ideal of IDEA, a “burgeoning discourse” which in Williams’ own words promises to “match rhetoric to reality and to avoid endless engagement in discourse intent on defining only more discourse and verbosity on rhetoric versus reality” (4). The book is thereby an attempt towards bridging this gap between rhetoric and action, between word and deed, by collecting contributions from academics, artists, practitioners, educators and activists who each in their own unique ways have grappled with the notion.

Part one of the book comprises of three essays offering historical and contemporary insights into the Black Lives Matters movement in the United States and the “New Back-to-Africa movement”. Chapter 1 offers an interesting and timely analysis of the defiant act of defacing and dismantling Confederate monuments by BLM protestors, and its symbolism for resisting “hegemonic racist regimes and a rewrite of history” (15). Chapter 2 relatedly explores the historical ties between the African-Caribbean and the African-American experience and activism, highlighting the former’s active role and contributions towards the “Black American socioeconomic, civil rights, and the political struggles in the United States” (47). In Chapter 3, Karl Ellis Johnson emphasizes the need for countering the negative

portrayals surrounding the continent of Africa, urging that “Africans and the people of African Diaspora must become more united using practical measures such as modern technology, branding, educational collaborations, attracting vacationers, and encouraging and allowing the Diaspora to buy time-shares or even property in Africa”. He further encourages African nations to “offer low-cost incentives such as lottery to buy land or low(er) taxes to encourage the African Diaspora to enter into business venture partnerships with Africans on the continent” (51). Johnson, however, falls short in addressing how his approach to resisting negative stereotyping through consumption counters the historically and materially rooted realities of colonialism and capitalist exploitation which continue to extract African resources and subjugate African lives. He further fails to reflect on how his approach towards incentivizing investments, and its resultant privatization and austerity, could exacerbate existing patterns of gendered inequality and poverty in African states.

Part two of the book continues to explore the different dimensions of IDEA through varying lenses. It begins with Catherine L. Adams’s brilliant contribution whereby she explores the African legacy of Oral History and offers important insights into the relevance of preserving such histories and the practicalities and challenges of conducting oral history interviews in an inter-generational context. In the chapter that follows, Anthony Sean Neal attempts towards philosophizing about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) so as to “revisit and reframe our working models of DEI overtime” (94). The chapter is, however, jargon-filled and seemingly engages in endless rhetorizing as opposed to fulfilling the book’s premise of bridging discourse and practice. Chapter 6 is the sole contribution which explicitly addresses gender diversity by offering a content analysis of transgender and gender non-conforming characters in children’s literature. The chapter is a welcome addition to this anthology which otherwise falls short in engaging gender identity and sexuality as important and interconnected axes of identity. Chapter 7 and 8, respectively, deal with IDEA as a business imperative for organizational survival (131) and a transformative tool within organizations. Though both essays share the approach to IDEA as an organizational imperative, VanSant is much more vocal in her critique of the existing legacies of “oppressive power structures and capitalism” (144) within organizational approaches to IDEA work.


The third and final part of the book deals explicitly with the potentials and challenges for diversity in higher education. In chapter 9, Peter A Campbell shares an insightful account of hosting a transgressive workshop at his home institute of Ramapo college, led by BLM activist and choreographer Shamell Bell. While Campbell reflects on his positionality admitting that he fears “infecting Bell’s work with the virus of my white male position”, it remains unclear to the reader why it is he who narrates Bell’s story and not Bell herself. Not only would engaging Bell in conversation have enriched the account by uncovering angles that may have remained hidden to Campbell by virtue of his privileged position, it would have disrupted the white academic tendency to speak *on behalf of* women of colour. Chapter 10 sheds light on the stereotypes surrounding Black masculinities and how they impact the lived experiences of Black male

students in US higher education. In chapter 11, Sandra Virginia Gonsalves-Domond shares her invaluable experiences in the area of critical knowledge production on how she, as a Black womanist educator, carves out “lived epistemological spaces” (180) whereby students become “critical partners in the consumption and deconstruction of information” (184). The book closes with a number of tangible design practices and interventions for inclusive education in chapter 12.

While the book has succeeded in gathering some insightful contributions, it falls especially short in addressing and problematizing historically-rooted interlocking systems of oppression. Intersectional perspectives, building on the rich legacy and teachings of Black intersectional feminists, to whom we owe our very language of resistance, are by and large absent from this volume. While representation at the level of surface may be achieved within our current reality of capitalist exploitation and hetero-sexist racist oppression, real social justice work requires the transformation of the very foundation upon which our organizations, social institutions, and universities are built. Whether diversity will ever rise up to this hefty but vital challenge remains yet to be seen.

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