

From (Sexual) Difference to Diversity: On Categories of Critique

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ABSTRACT: Difference and diversity are terms that have been heavily contested and fought over in feminist discourse and equity/equality activism and policy making. Both terms address questions of identity (formation), of positionality, and of critique, but both terms have also been used outside of critical studies and activism, e.g., in the neoliberal economy, and in ways that do not necessarily support the goals of eradicating structures of power that undermine and oppress the o/Other. The debates over difference and diversity are complex and multilayered depending on whether they target hiring practices, human resources management, or cultural studies and critical theory. This essay addresses the latter. First, it serves the function of a survey over feminist uses and critiques of difference and diversity in the academy and in critical theory. Second, it thinks through the possibilities of what a field of diversity studies might add to the already established fields of critical inquiry: I suggest that diversity studies may be used as a systematic and comparative tool in the academic analysis of and the activist fight against historical privilege and discrimination.

KEYWORDS: diversity, difference feminism, critical and cultural theory.

Words empty out of age. Die and rise again,
accordingly invested with new meanings, and
always equipped with a secondhand memory
—Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (79)

Introduction

A few years ago, I was asked to contribute a paper on diversity first at a workshop at the University of Marburg and then at a workshop conference on diversity organized by the German Association for American Studies.¹ I decided to track down the elusive and uneasy feeling that I have had with the very term 'diversity.' After all, what is in a name—what histories, associations, connotations, and "secondhand memories" (Minh-ha 79)—matters immensely within critical and cultural theory. My unease stemmed mainly from the use of the term 'diversity management' as a development tool in human resources (HR) because the notion that diversity needs to be managed came with a sour taste: in addition to purely

¹ Workshop conference "Diversity" at the University of Marburg, 19 June, 2017; "Diversity and/in the GAAS" at the Amerikaus Munich, 20-21 October, 2017.

bureaucratic and technocratic associations, diversity management evoked in me the idea that something that is in a mess could and should be managed in such a way that it no longer imposes a disturbance to the order of a system—in such a sense, diversity sounded to me like the pejorative and racist idea of ‘kinky’ hair: it may be naturally ‘kinky,’ but once treated and managed, it may be incorporated into the economic corporations that promise respect, affluence, and, therefore, socio-political and cultural participation. This implies that, when diversity needs to be managed, it needs to be optimized, controlled, and regulated. After diversity has been managed, some kind of order has been established; everything has been put into its assigned category and place. Graphs can be generated, reports can be written. Diversity, then, has been tamed, and I often wondered: can a concept that has been tamed and associated with a market value also be employed as a concept of critique?

As a feminist scholar of American studies, I thus take this essay as an opportunity to explore the uneasy feeling that the term diversity had affectively created in me: I outline critical scholarship on diversity and then read it along the ongoing debate within feminist theory on the concept of difference. As a way of entry into my discussion, however, I first present the dark and disillusioning outlook of diversity that Daniel Borzutzky offers in his poem “Managed Diversity,” in which he emphasizes the suffering that people of color experience at borders. In order to draw attention to the irreconcilable gap between the lived realities of diversity of those who seek refuge and those who live carefree lives in the political West, I then switch gears and present three short examples from the (entertainment) media in which diversity is regarded as a catch-all term for a trendy cosmopolitanism that is blind to structures of disparity and inequality. This second set of examples may seem tangential to the conversation at hand, but it reflects (and simultaneously shapes) the general sense of how the term diversity is often deployed. These everyday uses (powerful in their effect on non-academic and academic discourses alike), I argue, water down the critical potential that the term diversity may unfold, and they help to dilute the conceptual work that difference has played in feminist research—this I demonstrate by discussing guidelines of how to prepare diversity statements in the context of applying for positions in higher education in the United States. Discussing diversity in the academy, I follow Sara Ahmed’s research into the effects that

diversity has had on what used to be equal opportunity and women's representative programs, and I ask what is being gained and what is being lost by replacing the concept of difference with diversity. While difference remains one of the most contested terms in feminist theory, this contestation has also become vital to (new) materialist work that is being done in critical and cultural feminist theory, and I argue that we run the risk of losing this propeller when we turn our terminological attention away from questions of theory and adopt the language of management. Writing on the merits and disadvantages of diversity as a category of critique, this essay thus looks at what is in a name and what the term diversity can or cannot give to the conceptual work of cultural theory.

What Are We Talking about when We Talk about Diversity?

In his poem "Managed Diversity," Daniel Borzutzky takes the concept of diversity, which is commonly used in the rhetoric of uplift and successful diverse hiring practices, and turns it sour when he reflects on the diversity management that was practiced under the Trump administration at the Mexican American border. He depicts this U.S. American form of diversity management (and, synecdochally, the American nation state) as a foul and rotting, misanthropic and inhumane apparatus. But, as he implies, this kind of diversity management serves its country because it regulates wealth and market values on the backs of those who are told that they do not belong:

Through predictive analytics I understood the inevitability of the caged-up babies
They keep coffins at the border for when the refugees get too far from home
How many thousands of bodies can we fit in a tent or a swimming pool
We can live without the unknown in front of us if we keep enough babies in cages
The cardboard box sleeps one kid comfortably
Two is snug efficient recommended in times of austerity
Relational values change in relation to market sentiments
This is the danger of having too much access to illegal bodies (n.pag.)

In "Managed Diversity," as well as in poetry collections such as *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* (2015), *The Performance of Becoming Human* (2016), or *Lake Michigan* (2018), Borzutzky's poems penetrate the uncanny feeling that our world has "disappeared into the privatized cellar of humanity" (*Performance* 52), that too many are perceived as "a

decrepit, public body [...] and that [we] don't own [ourselves] anymore" (53). Borzutzky's allusions to Nazi concentration camps, the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, and gang districts in Chicago make clear that Borzutzky's critique is one that is directed towards hierarchies of power that have persisted over time, and these are the hierarchies of white supremacy and the markets that it has created. In "Managed Diversity," Borzutzky is most adamant about this:

Let's pretend the illegal bodies are bankers
Let's stick all the bankers in cages
Let's shove shit in their mouths
Let's pretend they are eating cryptocurrency
Let's create a crisis let's induce inflation
Let's undervalue the cost of their bodies
I dream of an economy where one arrested immigrant is replaced with one dead banker
I am not responsible for my dreams rather I am responsible for what I do with my dreams
When the sleep medication wears off I am alone with the machines that watch me
The global economy brightens my room with the surveillance of my rotten assets

Here, managed diversity guarantees the status quo of an allegedly homogenous society, which is ruled by the ever-changing demands of the neoliberal market, which only allows to be regulated by itself, that is, by a system that born of the capitalist logic of white privilege and the heritage of colonial-imperial politics, and which frames the global economy as free of ideology, color-blind, and based on equal opportunity. Diversity, in Borzutzky's poems, is not a means of participation but of separation in the name of the "rotten carcass economy" (*Performance 21; Murmurs*).

While Borzutzky's take on diversity (management) is a cynically gut-wrenching response to both the term and its managerial practice, scathing the alleged country of immigrants for its hypocrisy at the Mexican American border and elsewhere, diversity has been received much more benevolently in everyday culture, the press, fashion, and (to a degree) academia. This is undoubtedly due to its success in HR management and the air of uplift it has created for a society whose economy clearly benefits from diversity. Mahmoud Arghavan, Nicole Hirschfelder, and Katharina Motyl thus point out that "ethnic difference has become commodified *and* depoliticized under the neoliberal paradigm" (17; emphasis in original): "Not only have corporations realized that discrimination is bad for business; they have come

to conceive diversity as an asset to enhance value extraction" (17), which Angela Y. Davis evaluated as follows: "Diversity is a corporate strategy [...]. It's a difference that makes no difference at all" (qtd. In Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl 17). Diversity management and its corporate practices therefore appear like the "master's tools [that] will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, "The Master's Tools") and cannot conceptually be compared (or even conflated) with the contribution that feminist research, critical race studies, postcolonial and decolonial theory, Marxist thought, disability studies, and other critiques of hegemonic structures have been doing in the humanities and social sciences to critique the historical structures that have created lacks of participation.

Very much in contrast to both the critical research in the academy and to (dark) poetic visions such as Borzutzky's, the term diversity began to pop up outside of HR practices in the past five to ten years and has since entered into popular discourse. When I first started to prepare talks on the difference between feminism and diversity between 2017 and 2019, I stumbled across a number of clips of online journalism that reported on issues of diversity, which rubbed me the wrong way. Most memorable are two usages of diversity in the context of the German TV casting show *Germany's Next Topmodel*²; another one stems from a statement issued by Apple's vice president of diversity and inclusion, Denise Young Smith. And so early in 2017, an advertisement for the German TV casting show *Germany's Next Topmodel (GNTM)* featured the German fashion designer Michael Michalsky, who was serving as one of two jurors/team leaders/mentors on the show. Promoting the show (as well as himself), Michalsky explained his strategy for having one of his protégées win the show: he proudly announced that his team would be "Team Diversity"; what distinguished his team from that of his colleague was that "everyone is different," has "personality" and is a unique individual (*GNTM*, "Michael"). Various press articles additionally reported that the 2017-season was the first one to feature two transgender models; the show was thus able to market itself as inclusive, worldly, without prejudice, and practicing equality among cis and trans* women—as long as all of them

² *Germany's Next Topmodel* (by Heidi Klum) is the German version of *America's Next Top Model*; it has been running successfully on German television (Pro7) since 2006. The show keeps exploiting and hollowing out the idea of diversity to this day.

subscribe to the written and unwritten rules of a particular ideal of 'sexy' femininity sold by the fashion and entertainment industry.

In 2019, the show returned to this marketing strategy. Commenting on the opening episode of the 2019 installment of *Germany's Next Topmodel*, German journalist Julian Dörr remarked that Heidi Klum had come to embrace everything and anything that is 'diverse' and/or 'different' as if diversity was the "it-piece of the season." In the first episode, Klum thus revisits her former colleague's rhetoric and proudly proclaims: "diversity, that is, diversity in type and also in looks, is extremely important to me because diversity is *the* topic in the fashion world. We also have many amazing girls who applied and who perfectly represent diversity" (*GNTM*, "Dinner"; my translation).³ Supporting her claim, the show switches the scene and introduces a trans* model as one of the contestants, who had just recently had her final reassignment surgery performed (in 2021, a trans*woman won the competition for the first time). Throughout the season, Klum praises her performance and underlines that, although this model was still getting used to her new body, she owned it, was proud of it, and able to perform it better than some of the "girls" who had known their bodies from the day they were born.⁴ The first episode of the 2019 season also shows Klum speaking to a practicing Indian German Hindu candidate, whose look in a traditional sari Klum obviously admires and in an orientalist fashion singles out as a desirable other. However, Klum is concerned whether the contestant will be able to reconcile her faith with the impending photo shootings—Klum's show is known for expecting its contestants to shoot sparsely clad or basically naked and Klum is known to have little patience for contestants who do not accept the customs of the

³ Heidi Klum's statement in German: "Diversity, also Vielfalt im Typ und auch im Aussehen, ist mir natürlich extrem wichtig, denn Vielfalt ist momentan das Thema in der Fashionwelt. Es haben sich auch viele tolle Mädchen beworben, die Diversity perfekt repräsentieren" (*GNTM*, "Dinner" 16:10-16:30). Below, I discuss the ways in which formulations like the one used by Klum that assume (that an individual can be diverse or represent diversity) conceptualize diversity as an ontological quality of individuals, turning those markers of difference and of otherness from the mainstream and hegemonic culture into an asset for that very culture (hitherto, those markers had served to justify discrimination). A more detailed discussion follows below.

⁴ Especially in respect to the very specific demands of the mainstream modeling, the sex*gender performance of the contestants has to be viewed in line with Judith Butler's performative acts that constitute gender, that is, "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (900; emphasis in original).

modeling business. What these examples demonstrate is that the casting show works hard on presenting itself as diverse, open to non-traditional forms of womanhood, and as inclusive of non-white ethnicities and various religious faiths—again, as long as they perform in the ways that the show and the modeling business accepts them to perform. The ways in which diversity is celebrated in programs like *Germany's Next Topmodel* thus reinforce a specific normative and postfeminist view on the female* body, femininity, and what it means to be a strong woman* instead of having a diversity of bodies work on and change its (super)structure.

A different example with a similar effect was reported in October 2017, when Apple's (then) new vice president of diversity and inclusion, Denise Young Smith, was cited on her position on diversity. She argued that "[t]here can be 12 white, blue-eyed, blonde men in a room and they're going to be diverse too because they're going to bring a different life experience and life perspective to the conversation," and stated that "[d]iversity is the human experience" and that she gets "a little bit frustrated when diversity or the term diversity is tagged to the people of color, or the women, or the LGBT" (Weller). Statements like this propagate a dangerous conflation of structural discrimination that works along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability, on the one hand, and the individual's creative individuality or adaptability into hegemonic structures of a particular culture and socio-economic system, on the other hand. I find these three examples troubling in their use of 'diversity' because they employ the term purely decoratively in order to keep hegemonic systems of various sorts in order.

What the examples show, then, is that the term 'diversity' poses the same problem to cultural theory that many other terms, including 'difference,' have posed before: the term is not neutral and may be used retroactively against our best attentions, a point that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made in recourse to Derrida's discussion of "Plato's Pharmacy": with language, as with the pharmakon, we "acknowledge complicity and teach the use of poison as medicine" ("Roundtable"). This does not mean that one cannot (re)claim the words that have been co-opted by other causes, but one has to constantly reflect on them and respond to uses of the term that are other than one's own. Between then and now, I have seen many

like usages of 'diversity,' and the select examples given here illustrate that, in many contexts, diversity has become a blank term, which is employed to demonstrate a general openness towards, understanding of, and desire for multiplicity and multiculturalism—all of which seem to be in vogue in communities in which people have the privilege to jet-set the world and be welcome wherever they go.

The U.S.-American higher education job market faces a similar problem with the often obligatory 'diversity statement' that prospective researchers and instructors are asked to submit along with their job material.⁵ Discussing an article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on "the evolution of diversity," Amber Jamilla Musser comments on statements like, "On the surface, I'm a white guy, but I come from a working class background and I'm Irish Catholic" (qtd. in Musser 5): "diversity and inclusion become modes of recognizing the importance of difference in a community while not actually articulating it as separate; it is a way to make *everyone* different and have *everyone* learn from one another" (5; emphasis in original). The problem with such a take on diversity is obvious: the "university's embrace of everyone is meant to erase structural causes of inequality in order to ensure that everyone has the 'right to equal opportunity'" (5).

⁵ Diversity and affirmative action, of course, also play a major role in the admission process of college students of color. Harvard law professor David B. Oppenheimer's article on "Archibald Cox and the Diversity Justification for Affirmative Action" includes a section on the history of diversity as a submission category for students at Harvard. In a nutshell: At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Harvard's progressive president Charles Eliot (who was influenced by John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* [cf. Oppenheimer 191]) saw to a number of changes in the admission policies that fostered a "deep" diversity that was "shown in the variety of races, religions, households from richest to poorest, and in the mental gifts and ambitions" (Eliot qtd. in Oppenheimer 190). His successor, Abbott Lowell, however, used diversity as a means to limit Jewish admissions by introducing a quota in 1926 (cf. 192; 194; 195)—he also banned Black students from the Harvard dormitories (cf. 193). For a concise overview over the legal history of diversity, the practice of affirmative action, meritocracy, standardized testing, class in (higher) education, and the current cases at the Supreme Court that might end affirmative action with college admissions, see Nicholas Lemann's *New Yorker* article "The Diversity Verdict." Both Oppenheimer's and Lemann's article show that diversity has often been used as the "sole legal foundation" for counteracting segregation, but "[c]onsidering diversity to be the only permissible model appears to regard greater numbers of Black students on campus primarily as a way to broaden the experience of white students, and it fails to recognize the historical debt the country owes to Black people" (Lemann 38), which keeps solidifying educational and economic differences between white and Black Americans.

As if to counter such practices, the online magazine *Inside Higher Education* published a how-to article, “The Effective Diversity Statement” (2016), which draws attention to the purpose of diversity statements, on the one hand, and misconceptions of those who may not take diversity very seriously, on the other hand. Diversity statements, the article makes clear, “are an opportunity for applicants to explain to a search committee the distinct experiences and commitment they bring to the table” (Golash-Boza); their purpose is to “identify candidates who have professional skills, experience and/or willingness to engage in activities that would enhance campus *diversity and equity efforts*” (UC San Diego qtd. in Golash-Boza; emphasis in Golash-Boza). But, because many applicants seem to take this statement lightly, the *Inside Higher Ed*-piece also offers help to those on the job market to avoid common mistakes; one finds similar how-to guidelines from a number of universities that want to prepare their graduate students for the job market. As a strategy, the article suggests to “tell *your story*” (emphasis in original), be that by describing structural or personal experiences of discrimination or by identifying one’s own privilege. It warns applicants to “avoid false parallels” between perceived diversity—the example is to “be a Kansan in Missouri”—and to focus on “racial oppression, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism or some other commonly recognized form of oppression.” The article makes clear that diversity statements serve search committees to select candidates who are aware of underrepresented groups in higher education, who are conscious of privilege, every-day racism, sexism, and ableism, who understand how structures enable some and disable others, and that it is part of higher education to create different structures and to personally support students who are less privileged than others. Diversity statements thus do not necessarily ask applicants to identify how or whether they consider themselves as adding to the diversity of the department; they ask scholars to identify how, in their actual practice of teaching and activism beyond teaching, they implement their political convictions of supporting students who come from a multitude of backgrounds.

Diversity and the Academy in Theory and Practice

Generally speaking, Western university systems rest on several pillars of power that have supported the creation of epistemic injustice (see Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus).⁶ Focusing specifically on the endeavors to diversify the academy through diversity management in HR, some universities aim to employ diversity as a consciousness-raising tool in order to remedy structural inequality. But despite the best efforts, the “language of diversity” (Ahmed) and the affective labor that it brings to those legible as ‘diverse’ (cf. Musser 8-9) in academic HR management as well as cultural theory is not uncontested. Sara Ahmed, for instance, has been most hesitant to embrace the notion of diversity, and she puts her finger on the uneasy feeling that diversity has created in me:

Some critics suggest that ‘diversity’ enters higher education through marketization: the term is seen as coming from management, and from the imperative to ‘manage diversity’, or to value diversity ‘as if’ it was a human resource. Such a managerial focus on diversity works to individuate difference and to conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities. (“The Language of Diversity” 236)

In the same vein (but speaking about the situation at German universities), Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl comment that the “the managerial paradigm with which German universities have operationalized diversity actually depoliticizes issues of ethnic difference, which are, of course, embedded in power dynamics, and thus reproduces racialized power

⁶ Ethnocentric anthropology (esp. before Franz Boas’s cultural relativism) provided arguments for white supremacy and scientific racism (for a quick and student-friendly overview, see Nina Brown, Thomas McIlwraith, and Laura Tubelle de González’s *Perspectives: An Open Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*) and imperial practices of the sciences exploited colonized peoples’ knowledge, flora, and fauna (see, for instance, Londa Schiebinger’s *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*). The question of how to establish a diverse academy, a diverse curriculum, a diverse staff, faculty, and student body is a field too wide to include in this essay. Scholars and education activists have been pointing out the ways in which the educational structures themselves are reinforcing social inequalities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and dis/ability. Critical university studies and critiques of the neoliberal university target the very structural set-up of the university. Nihad M. Farooq, for instance, draws attention to “Frederick Jackson Turner’s turn of the [nineteenth] century understanding of the American university ‘as an imperial site’” and “as a new frontier for colonial expansion” (26), which is still shaping the inner working of the academy as an institution. For the purpose of “challenging institutional imperialism,” Farooq argues that diversity provides “our primary and most powerful [...] ‘tool’ [...] in supporting those who are further silenced by its empty gestures of inclusivity and transparency, and in performing, as bell hooks has so beautifully insisted, a truly transformative pedagogy” (27-28).

dynamics at the very same time as it nominally celebrates cultural pluralism,” and they point their finger at the problem with the “bureaucratic-managerial approach to diversity,” which they fear “may render the population represented at a university more heterogeneous; it will not, however, result in the voices of people of color being *heard* in institutional life, in Humanist knowledge production, or in the classroom” (19; emphasis in original).

It is not only the abstract concept of diversity that is problematic, however. Diversity also brings to the fore larger issues that relate to the practice of representation. Ahmed reports that “[t]here 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” (*On Being Included* 4; emphasis in original). Her critique targets the “model of cultural diversity [that] reifies difference as something that exists ‘in’ the bodies or culture of others, such that difference becomes a national property: if difference is something ‘they are’, then it is something we ‘can have’” (“Language” 235), which I take to mean that, by adding on diversity, we can take in order to become more politically correct without changing the structures that create inequality in the first place. Ahmed’s discomfort with the term ‘diversity’ is similar to Spivak’s criticism of tokenization, which Spivak felt whenever she was invited to speak at academic conferences as *the* representative of “the Third World view”⁷: “when you are perceived as a token, you are also silenced in a certain way because [...] if you have been brought there, they needn’t worry about it anymore, you salve their conscience” (“Questions of Multi-Culturalism” 596); and it echoes Trinh T. Minh-ha’s collection of grievances she herself or ethnically marked colleagues of hers experience:

It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone’s private zoo. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak spoke of their remarking “the maids upstairs in the guest quarters were women of color” in a symposium; Gloria Anzaldúa, of their using her as a token woman and her friend Nellie Wong as a “purveyor of resource lists”; Mitsuye Yamada, of having to start from scratch each time, as if she were “speaking to a brand new audience of people who

⁷ For a critique of the concept of the “Third World Woman,” see Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” and Rita Felski’s “The Doxa of Difference” (9-11). For a comprehensive summary of the critique of the label “postcolonial,” see Rita Felski’s “The Doxa of Difference” (8-9).

had never known an Asian Pacific woman who is other than the passive, sweet, etc., stereotype of the 'Oriental' woman"; Audre Lorde, of the lack of interracial cooperation between academic feminists whose sole explanation for the issue remains: "We did not know who to ask"; and Alice Walker, of the necessity of learning to discern the true feminist—"for whom racism is inherently an impossibility"—from the white female opportunist—"for whom racism, inasmuch as it assures white privilege, is an accepted way of life." (82-83)

Be it a token, specimen (Musser 2),⁸ or figure (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 3), Ahmed warns against the simplistic view of the "stranger" as if we could speak of an "ontology of strangers" (3). Ahmed suggests that multiculturalism and its desire to integrate cultural difference/diversity produces the very difference by acknowledging forms of difference that can be incorporated and forms of difference that cannot be incorporated into the existing socio-cultural structure (cf. 4). She thus criticizes multiculturalism as a practice that picks and chooses from the plethora of differences that seek acceptance. For both Ahmed and Spivak, diversity can never be about changing the superficial appearance of society—for instance, by adding token representatives (often in Westernized looks) to the smooth and highly polished group photographs of companies' staff. The latter, obviously, is a skewed understanding of diversity: individuals may make a workplace, a community, or a society more diverse only if that workplace, community, or society stops hand-picking a form of diversity that does not challenge their history of strategic and structural exclusion and its inherited practices. Establishing diversity would actually have to mean that the hegemonic culture actively and continuously works on removing those power structures and those habits that create(d) inequality—establishing diversity from the position of power thus means to become a little less of what one is if one accepts that hierarchies of power and privilege are structurally incorporated into subject positions. The dilemma, of course, is that for many institutions superficially changing their looks is a first step in a long journey of changing their institutional practices. But at the same time, there remains the risk that diversity measures simply cover

⁸ Amber Jamilla Musser uses the term 'specimen' to denote a similar phenomenon that Spivak describes as tokenization; she writes: "As a Black queer woman who teaches and researches sexuality studies, identity politics within the institution *and* within sexuality studies conspire to produce me as a specimen—that is to say, a commodity, static and rare. I use the term *specimen* here because it draws attention to the ways that money, science, and desire intersect to confer value on an object" (1-2; emphasis in original).

over the creative potential of difference; they are not targeting but reinforcing inequality and they are effectually whitewashing, patriarchalizing, and silencing those who are different.

In *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed takes as an example a statement of the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs from 1982, which states that “[m]ulticulturalism is much more than the provision of special services to minority ethnic groups” and that they “accept our difference and appreciate a variety of lifestyles rather than expect everyone to fit a standardized pattern” (qtd. in Ahmed 95). Ahmed’s critique is that such an understanding of multiculturalism “powerfully evokes and then erases particular histories of racial differentiation: racial difference, already construed as ethnic difference, is redefined in terms of cultural diversity, that is, in terms that erase distinctions between groups” (95). As an effect, such an “‘acceptance’ of difference actually serves to conceal those differences which cannot be reduced to ‘cultural diversity’” (95). This allows for the myriads of reiteration of statements like “diversity yes, but—,” which foreclose a deeper understanding of difference. Instead, such a form of multiculturalism / diversity fosters “easy commodification in terms of an aesthetics of appearance” (96). To take the example of *Germany’s Next Topmodel* referenced earlier, commodifiable difference becomes ontologized as ‘personality.’ The forms of diversity invited in to the community are those that are different and deviate from the “‘standardized situations’” but yet fit in (Schutz qtd. in Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 96). Ahmed sees in multiculturalism and diversity measures a “double and contradictory process of incorporation and expulsion” (97) that changes little in the status quo and actually helps to obscure mechanisms and structures of oppression and exclusion.

Having to work on the diversity document for her own school, Ahmed had to grapple with “what [...] diversity ‘do[es]’ when it is ‘put into action’” (“Language” 237). She first investigated this question through ten qualitative interviews with “diversity or equal opportunities practitioners within Australian Universities” (237) and found that the term arose to substitute equity/equality measures and affirmative action: “diversity enables action because it does not get associated with the histories of struggle evoked by more ‘marked’ terms such as equality and justice” (238) or “other more challenging terms (such as ‘women,’ ‘feminism,’ [...] ‘anti-

racism,' and so on" (246). Instead of explicitly challenging privilege (246), the term "diversity" creates a feel-good happy-go-lucky atmosphere. And so, Ahmed notices that "[i]f 'diversity' emerges after the failure of the term 'equality' to work, then 'diversity' itself might be read as symptomatic of the failure to achieve equality" (238). Summarizing this disillusioning proposition for those who believe that inequality and privilege need to be acknowledged in order to work through and past it, Ahmed's study suggests that diversity allows for watered down concepts that are not directly tied to equity and social justice, but this may also be evaluated as having positive effects; after all, because diversity can do positive work in contexts where terms like affirmative action build up resistance.

Amber Jamilla Musser, too, is wary and skeptical of diversity measures and the effects it has on the affective labor expected to be performed by faculty who is read as diverse. She draws on Roderick A. Ferguson's work, which puts forth that "the university worked to conceal the deeper systemic ruptures that [the civil rights movements and student protests of the 1960s] aimed for—redistribution of economic and material resources, epistemological change, and an overt politicization of knowledge—in favor of incorporating difference into the existing system of power" (Musser 2). While diversity "creates a space for the acknowledgement of difference," it also "works as a tool to discipline subjects—making them aware, as Ferguson says, of their place within the particular economies of minority difference" (3). This double-sided sword of diversity thus presents a dilemma: it increases representation of people who are legible as minorities, but it also "highlights the commodification of minority bodies" (4)—a point also made by Ahmed and Spivak. Focusing on representatives of diversity and their individual stories, diversity, just as multiculturalism, has to be "criticized as a tactic to manage rather than engage minority" because it "naturalize[s] the idea that difference occurred in certain bodies and would manifest in certain ways, *without examining social structures of condition*" (4; my emphasis). Musser observes how this plays out in the careers of minority group researchers and teachers who, "out of love, necessity, or obligation—or a combination of the three," take on the affective yet uncompensated labor of advising students, working in committees and contributing to the various services to the department and discipline to achieve structural or at least representational change.

However, because 'diversity' is so open to interpretation and because anyone can construct themselves 'to be diverse,' "[d]iversity can be defined in ways that reproduce rather than challenge social privilege," Ahmed argues, and this is why "it can [actually] cease to challenge social privilege and advantage, and even come to work in ways that might conceal such forms of privilege" ("Language" 240). Despite her criticism, Ahmed sees two advantages in diversity work: first, in order to get something done, we must speak the language of those who bring in the money and who administer change, even it is administered in small steps and less specific manners. Second, diversity work provides knowledge and experience about "encountering resistance and countering that resistance," and it provides valuable insights into "what does or does not get across" within the institutions that diversity workers work in (*On Being Included* 175). Ahmed thus concludes that diversity work may make us "understand how speaking in the happier languages of diversity does not necessarily mean an identification with the institution but can be understood as a form of practical knowledge of the difficulty of getting through" (175).

Janet Newman comes to a similar conclusion when she discusses different forms of neoliberalism and the agency feminist work can put into action within them. She pleads to us not to forget the agency of feminist work and warns us not to overestimate capitalism and neoliberalism as a "self-evident phenomenon that needs little discussion" (204). While feminists who work in big corporations or state agencies (that is, those who have been dubbed as feminists in tailored pant suits) often feel complicit with the neoliberal strategies of the companies or agencies they work for, they also see that their own contributions do make a difference. The problem that Newman identifies lies with the tendency that "[b]oth feminism and neoliberalism privilege reflexive, flexible forms of subjectivity and 'empowered', information-rich actor" (213)—even if the genealogy of thought and ideology behind feminism and neoliberalism vastly differ from one another. The consequence of the shared affinity towards the flexible is that "the language through which politics was conducted will be appropriated, potentially leaving political movements 'lost for words'"—as it has happened with the "New Labour" rhetoric in the UK (214) and the "New Deal" rhetoric in the United States (cf. Fraser 131).

Diagnosing the political situation after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA, Nancy Fraser evaluates the politics that came into effect during Bill Clinton's administration as a "'progressive neoliberalism' that mixed together truncated ideals of emancipation and lethal forms of financialization" (132). The United States "buzzed with talk of 'diversity,' 'empowerment,' and 'non-discrimination,'" Fraser writes, but it identified "'progress' with meritocracy instead of equality" (131). In her analysis, "these terms equated 'emancipation' with the rise of a small elite of 'talented' women, minorities, and gays in the winner takes-it-all corporate hierarchy instead of with the latter's abolition" (131).⁹ While Johanna Brenner criticizes Fraser for mistaking a "meritocratic feminism [...] for feminism as a whole" (135), she does not object to Fraser's general narrative of "the rise of neoliberalism" (134) or her claim that meritocratic feminism did influence the ways in which the corporate world has taken in the language of diversity—arguments that Fraser had already developed in her 2009-article "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." Here, she lays out the ways in which second-wave feminisms targeted state-organized capitalism, androcentrism, étatism (capitalism "suffused with a technocratic, managerial ethos" [378]), and *Westphalianism* ("binding obligations of justice apply only among fellow citizens" [378]). Fraser's analysis argues that feminist and neoliberal "critiques of traditional authority [...] appear to converge" (388) because "the neoliberal onslaught [has] instrumentalize[d] our best ideas" (389). In Fraser's narrative, the neoliberal market has trumped (gender) justice, and it is on feminist theory and practice to reclaim the power of definition. Newman voices a similar critique as Brenner in laying open "singular conceptions of both feminism and neoliberalism" (200), and she points to the many ways in which feminist politics are being enacted despite the neoliberal structures that delimit them. However, negotiating feminist politics within the logics of the economy often comes at the risk of complicity with practices that feminist politics actually sought to change (cf. 215-17). For Newman, it remains a question of the "political

⁹ Angela McRobbie has made similar arguments about the Labor administration in the UK under Tony Blair in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (5), in which she also describes the effects that postfeminism has had on society: "Drawing on vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guide, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism" (1).

agency” feminist work “or for how contradictions are lived, managed and produce potential lines of fracture” (204). She thus comes to a similar conclusion as Ahmed, who recognizes the potential that diversity measures might effect in mainstream contexts although she wished they would go by a different name to make structures of inequality visible.

From (Sexual) Difference to Diversity?

While the diversity rhetoric of today seems to sit well with neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, liberal and equality feminists in the 1990s challenged the notion of difference that points to the material and discursive differences that founded cultural socio-political inequality. Ahmed’s, Newman’s, and Fraser’s critique of ‘diversity’ as a neoliberalized term is reminiscent of Rosi Braidotti’s frustration with the appropriation of difference, which she seeks to reclaim from reactionary uses. From a new materialist perspective, Braidotti complains that the notion of difference has been co-opted by what she identifies as biological essentialism, on the one hand, and politically conservative and right-leaning discourses, on the other hand: “Resting on fixed notions of one’s territory, these ideas of ‘difference’ are deterministic, and also exclusive and intrinsically xenophobic,” she argues that the political right uses difference to establish “power-relations and structural patterns of exclusion at the national, regional, provincial or even more local level” (*Metamorphoses* 4). Difference, as per Braidotti, is being instrumentalized to promote the singular and identitarian—this is a skewed appropriation of a concept that, in its best version, was to promote the particular in order to raise awareness of the situatedness and locatedness of individual positions. She asks us to “formulate otherness, difference without devaluing it” and to “think of the other not as other-than, but as positively other entity” (qtd. in Felski 4). After all, her feminist posthumanist position grows out of the kind of “[f]eminist philosophies of sexual difference [that] are historically embedded in the decline and crisis of Western humanism, the critique of phallogocentrism and the crisis of European identity” (“Becoming-Woman” 44).

Salvaging the term difference as a useful and appropriate term requires to re-evaluate the serious criticism that ‘difference feminists’ received from poststructuralist and postmodern feminists, but it also requires a re-assessment of the notion of identity. In order to do the first,

material and corporeal feminists have, for instance, returned to a critical reading of Luce Irigaray's work, which is notoriously difficult to characterize as either materialist or poststructuralist: Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell criticize her materialist positions as essentialist—"for Butler, Irigaray's account of sexual difference reduces sexuality to a version of heterosexuality, and for Cornell, it reduces ethnic and presumably class identity to an oppression of a sexual or gender identity where it might not be appropriate" (Grosz 107); Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman acknowledge both her poststructuralist/linguist work in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (2) as well as her new materialist feminism (10). Grosz defends Irigaray's "difference feminism" against the "charges of homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and Eurocentrism" (100) and of "privileging sexual difference over all types of difference" (107), arguing that these charges are based on misunderstandings of Irigaray's more or less polemical writing, she does not deny Irigaray's materialist position in which sexual difference is the "universal, both natural and social condition" (102).¹⁰

Writing from a marginalized position at a time when 'managed diversity' was not yet promoted as desirable, Audre Lorde, for instance, called for the acknowledgement of difference as a necessary factor in fighting oppression and discrimination. She argued that "[i]nstitutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" who "occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" ("Age, Race, Class, and Sex" 108, 107). As a Black feminist, Audre Lorde criticized conventional difference feminism for only recognizing sexual difference as legitimate at the cost of neglecting the differences in race, class, or dis/ability, but she also promoted the concept of difference. For her, it is not the "real differences between us of race, age, and sex" that "are separating us" but "our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (108). For Lorde difference should be used as "a springboard for creative change" (108).

¹⁰ See also *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, edited by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser.

One of the affirmative responses towards difference has been articulated by new materialist feminists, who pursue the goal of putting in conversation materialist but non-essentialist feminist positions with positions that developed out of the poststructuralist / linguistic turn. Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, for instance, develop their philosophies of difference and becoming in recourse to Gilles Deleuze and (his reading of) Henri Bergson. For Bergson difference is not so much a static material ascription of being; instead, it creates the possibility of change and becoming through internal and external difference, “a becoming of difference” (Grosz 41). This concept of “difference, difference as force, is elaborated and developed [...] alongside of, and at times undermines, the emphasis on identity” as Grosz explains (40). She thus establishes difference not as “the union of the two sexes [or] the overcoming of race and other differences through the creation of production of a universal term by which they can be equalized or neutralized, but [as] the generation of ever-more variation, differentiation, and difference” (47). Braidotti’s approach to difference is grounded in a radical critique of the philosophical and imperial tradition, in which difference is cast as “pejorative” (*Metamorphoses* 3). Difference, she argues, has “been colonized by hierarchical and exclusionary ways of thinking, which means that historically it has also played a constitutive role not only in events that Europe can be proud of, such as the Enlightenment, but also in darker chapters of our history, such as in European fascism and colonialism” (Braidotti, “Becoming-Woman” 45). And although Braidotti generally leans toward a Deleuzian idea of becoming,¹¹ she also does not tire of reminding her readers that “one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted control over [...]. In order to announce the death of the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one” (51)—or to be heard as one, as Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl would add. The significance of critique therefore lies in relentlessly pointing towards the colonizing and objectifying structures that survive in rhetoric as much as in action because and in spite of our best intentions.

¹¹ Braidotti summarizes: “Deleuze’s ultimate aim with respect to sexual difference is to move towards its final overcoming. The nomadic or intensive horizon is a subjectivity ‘beyond gender’ in the sense of being dispersed, not binary; multiple, not dualistic; interconnected, not dialectical; and in a constant flux, not fixed” (“Becoming-Woman” 50).

While new materialist feminists work on salvaging the notion of difference, Rita Felski's "The Doxa of Difference" (1997) offers an analysis of difference that frames the debate on difference as the "progressive emancipation of difference from identity" and traces the ways in which the focus changed from humanist ideals of equality to critiques of the "phallogentric logic based on the tyranny of identity" (1). After the influence of poststructuralist theory "female difference has fragmented into multiple differences and any appeal to general ideals or norms can only be considered politically questionable and theoretically naïve," as Felski argues (1). Yet, or maybe because of the multiplicity of non-essentialist understandings of difference, Felski observes that "difference has become doxa," especially after the new focus on difference by new materialist feminists such as Rosi Braidotti, Drucilla Cornell, and Elisabeth Grosz: "they seek to legitimate sexual difference as a foundational category of feminist thought while simultaneously emptying it of any normative or essentialist content" (Felski 4). Felski seeks to "deontologize [difference] by offering a redescription of the status of equality and difference that is framed in pragmatic rather than metaphysical terms" (2), and I present her in order to ask whether the current "doxa of diversity" likewise "undercut[s] any vision of alterity as positive or subversive by reaffirming the inextricable connections between difference and hierarchy" (Felski 11). Felski remains skeptical of Braidotti's affirmative understanding of difference as "positively other" because the rhetoric of difference allows difference only within a hegemonic order, which follows the "logic of Western imperialism in its unthinking appropriation of the difference of the other" (11). Such a rough and undifferentiated notion of difference homogenizes the peculiarities of particular figurations of power and allows for vast generalizations that reiterate stereotypes and colonial attitudes. Ien Ang, who serves Felski as a point of reference, thus formulates a critique of difference that is echoed in Sara Ahmed's critique of diversity: "Difference is 'dealt with' by absorbing it into an already existing feminist community without challenging the naturalized legitimacy and status of that community as a community" (qtd. in Felski 11). Revisiting this conversation on difference from the 1990s demonstrates that the tension between equality and identity within society and discourse has lost little if any of its relevance for the current debate of diversity.

On the Im/Possibility of Diversity as a Concept of Critique

For feminist theory, intra-feminist disputes have been the life-line and engine for continuous reassessments of the power structures that govern philosophical and political thought. Be it across lines of class, race and ethnicity, dis/ability, or desire, feminist theory necessitates critical self-reflection in order to question its own place and responsibility within the systems of power and control that shape our societies and our positions in them. Revisiting a selection of critiques of the notion of difference in feminist theory shows that the critical debate on identity and power offers complex historical and philosophical dimensions to the struggles at hand that may never be resolved because they have been written onto and into 'diverse' bodies. Recognizing the limits of radical feminist thought in non-academic and non-activist contexts, I understand the pragmatic reasons that Ahmed gives in deploying diversity instead of affirmative action or the like in contexts of HR management. For debates within scholarship, and especially feminist theory, however, it remains difficult to shake off the feeling that diversity is a term so tamed that it obscures the rich and complex history and practice of thought that keeps negotiating intersectional positions of power, equality, and identity—adopting the term within cultural theory bears the danger of merely giving an old problem a fresher and more chipper name that fits better to the neoliberal (post)digital age of the early twenty-first century than other terms would. But debates within the humanities and cultural studies need uncomfortable theoretical approaches to underpin the important and strategic work done by diversity advocacy and 'nasty women' in fitted pantsuits.

How, then, can diversity add to the plethora of critical approaches in the humanities and cultural studies that address specifically situated and historically contingent practices of oppression (such as feminist theory, gender studies, queer studies, dis/ability studies, critical whiteness studies, critical race studies, and anti-racist theory play a major role as well as critical post-humanist, post- and de-colonial theory and critiques of capitalism)? Diversity as a theoretical approach in cultural studies might do what intersectional theory has done for understanding the multiple forms of discrimination of individuals; it may work systematically from a comparative angle to study the situated and intersectional responses that the academy

and activism has thus far developed to analyze and combat the historical structures and practices that have created privilege and discrimination. As a comparative tool, diversity studies will need to counter the urge that is visible in the entertainment industry and in management to fix or tame phenomena and people who are other than the mainstream, which turns culturally specific traditions or radical perspectives that challenge conceptions of hegemonic, normative, and normalizing processes into easily digestible assets. Instead of establishing common denominators and median values, diversity studies would have to challenge normalization and hierarchical standards, which means that diversity in critical and cultural theory must not be managed.

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