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# Reflexivity and the perpetuation of inequality in the cultural sector: half awake in a fake empire?

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## ABSTRACT

Discourses of social justice offer the sense of a progressive and developing narrative within the arts sector. Cultural democracy, cultural equity and cultural diversity address broad policy issues related to production, consumption and representation. This article questions whether these approaches have failed in their challenge to the long-established power dynamics of the cultural sector. We take this position of failure as a starting point for a self-reflexive account of the lack of progressive change in the sector. We argue that reflexivity is needed to avoid the elision of the progressive impulse through the inauthentic and rhetorical promotion of 'fakequity'. As scholars from divergent yet mutually Anglo-centric traditions, our aim is to better understand how a self-reflexive approach might counter the (non)performative behaviour of the cultural sector. Without such an approach, initiatives supposedly designed to be culturally democratic risk enforcing structures of exclusion and facilitating a 'non-performative woke democratisation of culture'.

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## Introduction

The main argument this article makes is that there will be little progress towards a more emancipatory and democratic cultural policy – in the UK or the US – unless the goals of cultural democracy, diversity and equity are first and foremost treated as issues of *politics* and *culture*, rather than as cultural policy problems that can be fixed by new initiatives, funding streams, or professional development schemes targeted at minoritized ethnic groups, women, people with disabilities and other historically excluded groups within the cultural sector and/or its audiences. As Hill and Sobande (2018) argue, 'without transformational and structural changes, increased surface-level representation is meaningless' (p. 109).

For the purposes of this discussion, we consider reflexivity to embrace the multi-level, analytic attention to how the researcher is intimately involved in the research process/product. In considering the current discourse around cultural democracy, diversity and equity, we argue that a lack of self-reflexivity within both academia and the cultural sector

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risks neutralising the potential for change at the exact moment when it could most be realised.

Our discussion of reflexivity and researchers' and cultural sector actors' positionality is indebted to feminist scholarship focusing on self-reflexivity in research. In particular, the work of Sara Ahmed (2012) on the nature and functions of the 'unhappy non-performative' in diversity work within universities lends itself well to the analysis of diversity and equality initiatives in the cultural sector. Before discussion of Ahmed's work on institutional attempts to promote diversity, it is worth pausing to consider the meaning of the term 'performativity' and its use both in literary and cultural theory, and in some corners of theatre and performance studies (as well as general parlance) to indicate opposite phenomena. *Both* meanings are referred to at different points in this article, following their use in the different bodies of literature we use to build our analysis.

The notion of performativity that Ahmed developed builds on the work of philosopher J.L. Austin – largely credited as the author of its first description (Loxley, 2007) – and feminist scholar Judith Butler. These authors have been pivotal in developing and establishing the concept of language as not only describing reality but bringing it into being. As Loxley (2007) explains, 'words do something in the world', and utterances 'are actions *in themselves*, actions of a distinctively linguistic kind': they "make a difference in the world; it could be said that they produce a different world, even if only for a single speaker and a single addressee" (p. 2). Butler's (1990) contribution was to extend this way of thinking about how the world is made through 'acts' to questions of gender and identity, and to assert that '[g]ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed', and that '[a]s performance which is performative, gender is an "act", broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority' (pp.278–9).

Alongside this understanding of performativity, an alternative understanding of the role of the performative exists, which is predominant in theatre and performance studies as well as in everyday language. As Richard Schechner (2013) explains, the domain of performance studies is to make sense of 'showing doing', that is, performance: "Showing doing' is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing" (p. 28). In this case, then, the 'performative dimension' of something refers to 'the deliberate, self-conscious "doing" of highly symbolic actions in public' (Bell, 2009, pp. 159–160). As this article will argue, both interpretations of 'performative' are of relevance to the discussion, yet it is worth being clear about the differences between them, especially as contemporary online popular culture, mostly through social media, has embraced the 'performative' for the purposes of irony and satire, thus intentionally blurring the lines between 'authentic' and 'performative' online content, and undermining the very possibility of unambiguous interpretations, especially when genre such as deadpan humour is concerned (Holm, 2021).

The apparent failure of successive modes of critique – from cultural studies to cultural democracy and cultural equity – to effect substantive change in the structures of the arts, at a time when both a heightened sense of urgency and a significant degree of signalling is underway (ACE, 2020a, 2020b; Henry & Ryder, 2021) suggests that self-reflexivity is a necessary requirement for any future forms of critical engagement both with, and within, the cultural sector. Without such an approach, initiatives supposedly designed

to be culturally democratic risk enforcing structures of exclusion and facilitating a tokenistic and ‘non-performative woke democratisation of culture’.

### Different approaches – the same goal?

The shared guiding ethos of cultural democracy, cultural equity and the impetus to ‘diversify’ culture is the promotion of cultural opportunities of varying natures for as many people as possible. Yet how this ethos is understood and meant to be achieved varies between the concepts. In the UK, under the rubric of cultural democracy, the focus is on cultural value and attendant questions of cultural authority, power, voice, and representation (Belfiore, 2020). In the US, the cultural equity agenda places the focus on representative distribution of resources to address long-standing inequalities, and the privileging of bureaucratic logics that push questions of cultural authority to the background. ‘Diversity’, meanwhile, has been the goal pursued (with limited success) by various initiatives in the arts and creative industries in both countries, with the purpose of redressing the imbalance of representation of minoritized groups in production, distribution and consumption of both publicly subsidised and commercially produced cultural forms (H. Gray, 2016; Gregory, 2019; Moss, 2005; Saha, 2017). These terms refer to different attempts to attain the same goal: to challenge traditional, Eurocentric and white forms of cultural authority and value embedded in mainstream arts, cultural and educational institutions and in the cultural policy machinery that supports them.

*Cultural democracy* sits in opposition to the structural modus operandi of the sector, the democratisation of culture. In the democratisation of culture policy model, the ouroboric logic of cultural authority drives judgements of cultural value which in turn provide the rationale for funding decisions whose tokenistic conferral of money – and therefore status – guarantees the reproduction of cultural authority. In this context, cultural democracy seeks not to alter but to overturn that structure by delegitimising its attendant ideology: its ultimate goal is to contest established forms of cultural authority predicated on privilege, wealth, and tradition, in favour of new, more democratic and distributed forms of cultural legitimacy and authority. Cultural democracy does this by aiming for a mechanism of cultural participation which is unmediated by expertise and freed from traditional hierarchies of value (Hadley, 2021).

In a similar vein, *cultural diversity* seeks to widen involvement of minoritized groups in cultural production with a view to achieving their equitable representation in the country’s cultural life, while also incentivising engagement among traditionally neglected communities. Linda Moss (2005) charts the evolution of the concept in the UK context, noting that it started life within cultural policy discourse in 1976, under the guise of ‘ethnic minorities’ communities’ arts’. This cumbersome label ‘indicates that intention was limited to the enabling of homespun participatory work within those communities, not the presentation of their art to, or within, the mainstream’(p. 190). This was but the first step, however, in a quick succession of labels between the 1980s and the mid-2000s: as a new generation of home-grown black and brown artists became active, ‘the terminology shifted to “ethnic arts” (no “minorities” or “communities”)’ (Ibid.). Next was ‘multi-cultural arts’ and the label’s implication of equality between various cultures and their artistic expressions, and the resulting policy focus on trying to bring audiences from all backgrounds to them. ‘The current term, “cultural diversity” – Moss (ibid.) concludes –

'encompasses not only various separate traditions, but also mixtures within them'. Equally, different ideas about what constitutes 'multiculturalism' exist across both areas (see e.g. R. Robertson, 2016). As Heinze (2018, p. 10) notes, the broadly accepted European definition (in contrast to the US) adopted 'the historically questionable concept of different cultures within a country coexisting ... while not engaging in any meaningful dialogue'. Building on Moss's account, Saha's (2017) work on British Asian theatre demonstrates that,

'new audience' strategies – launched from a cultural policy rationale and operationalised by theatre venues and companies – impede well-meaning and well-funded attempts to subvert existing forms of cultural marginalisation and exclusion, producing a form of segregated visibility that reinforces racial inequalities. (p. 304)

'Segregated visibility' is a concept borrowed from Stuart Hall (1993) who, commenting in the early 1990s about the renewed interest and visibility of black popular culture, observed that 'what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility' (p. 107) which ultimately leaves traditional hierarchies of cultural value unscathed. Nor is this affliction limited to the state-subsidised arts: the 'diversity and equity picture' in the commercial creative industries is no less concerning (Saha, 2018). Through an analysis of the relationship between race and UK public service broadcasting, Malik (2013) identifies a phase beyond multiculturalism and cultural diversity which she terms, 'creative diversity' wherein ideas of quality and creativity are foregrounded over (structural) questions of (in)equality or the positive recognition of social and cultural difference. The past ten years have seen a growing volume of scholarship exploring the lack of ethnic diversity in industries ranging from film and TV (Cobb, 2020; Henry & Ryder, 2021; Nwonka, 2020), publishing (Saha & van Lente, 2020), music (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013), alongside the persisting 'class ceiling' limiting access to creative careers for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Friedman & Laurison, 2020).

In the US context, the democratising and diversifying impetus has evolved past multiculturalism, a practice that lacked critical reflection and meaningful change and instead focused on basic representation and recognition (Renshon, 2011). Currently, the focus is on the concept of *cultural equity*. As an objective of policy, cultural equity seeks to redistribute resources within the cultural infrastructure but does not necessarily focus on altering the structure of that system – the idea being that, in time, a more equitable distribution of resources and representation will translate into more culturally diverse and representative outputs, broader consumption of diverse expressions, and the eventual acknowledgement of the diversity of cultural value. A particular focus of cultural equity then, is achieving equality in the operationalisation of the structures of arts funding and administration, rather than aspiring to do away with them. Consequently, 'workforce diversity' has been a central focus of struggles for cultural equity in the US (Stein, 2019), whereby 'equity', 'workforce diversity', and 'compositional difference' of staff become shorthand for a complex mix of policy objectives which includes those that, in the UK, fall under both the diversity and cultural democracy umbrella (B. Heidelberg, 2020). As Cuyler (as cited in Stein, 2019, p. 1) explains:

racial and ethnic workforce diversity is part of a quartet that includes racial and ethnic access, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI). Together these intersecting practices embody creative justice or the manifestation of all people living creative and expressive lives on their own terms.

What then has undone the salience or impact of these concepts within the cultural policy contexts of two different Western nations? Cultural democracy, diversity and equity do not offer narratives of success. More precisely, when we consider the sustained, structural, and endemic resistance to their actualisation, what we encounter are *narratives of failure*. In arguing that Art Council England has ‘nurtured a “culture” that is consumed by a minority’ (see, Neelands et al., 2015), Upchurch (2016) states that ‘[i]n terms of social justice and equality, the arts council model has failed to support the arts that the majority of citizens choose to enjoy’ (p. 208). Such intellectual currents led Per Mangset (2020) to recently comment that ‘contemporary public cultural policy is not adapted to major transformation processes in contemporary Western societies. Are we now facing the end of modern cultural policy?’ (p. 399).

Our contention is that whatever the fate of ‘modern cultural policy’, the real struggle for (and revival of) attempts to democratise and diversify the arts lies firmly in the camp of *cultural politics*, rather than policy. The failure of cultural policy can be read as the recalcitrance of the sector to deal with notions of *power*, and more specifically, with the fact that power operates through subjugation, silencing and oppression. Power is integral to culture, and cultural politics has power struggles at its core. As Jordan and Weedon (1995) put it: ‘*All signifying practices – that is, all practices that have meaning – involve relations of power*’ (emphasis in the original, p. 11). They therefore entail relations of domination and subordination: ‘We are either active subjects who take up positions from which we can exercise power within a particular social practice, or we are subjected to the definitions of others’ (ibid.). Change cannot happen without significant shifts in power, and without long-dominant voices losing their privileged position.

Demands for cultural equity have resulted in an increase in equity training and pipeline programming such as paid internships for college students from historically marginalised communities. Yet many cultural organisations have created cultural equity statements<sup>1</sup> while failing to acknowledge their own ongoing histories of perpetrating oppression and failing to engage in the required work of dismantling oppressive systems within their organisations and their communities (B. Heidelberg, 2020). These initiatives have also been contested as examples of fake equity or *fakequity*, when individuals, organisations, or governments talk about or signal a focus on equity, but never actually create the conditions for realising it (Okuno, 2015). According to Erin Okuno, the hallmark of ‘fakequity’ is ‘talk with no action’:

You think you’re doing equity work but you’re really passing off a project as equity and perpetuating the same power dynamics with no community accountability. Systems stay the same but you anticipate different results by having a “if I build it they will come” approach. Same shit, different label. You still hold the power and are selfish with sharing it. You take the easy road (Okuno, 2015).

In the US, for example, many cultural organisations have created ‘cultural equity statements’, that is, formal and public articulations of their definition of cultural equity and a declaration of their intent to work towards or uphold that definition. However, organisations have too often made such public statements while failing to acknowledge their own ongoing histories of perpetrating oppression and failing to engage in the required work of dismantling oppressive systems within their organisations and their communities (B. Heidelberg, 2020). In her comprehensive evaluation of the US initiative co-delivered by

the Ford Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, the *Diversifying Art Museum Leadership Initiative* (DAMLI), which offered museums grants to help them develop strategies to diversify their curatorial and administrative staff, B. Heidelberg (2020) observes that ‘despite the increase in inclusion discourses used in the field, arts organisations, including museums, have not become more diverse nor inclusive’ (p. 391).

Furthermore, ‘speaking up’ and pressing for diversity, equity and a more democratic approach to cultural planning and funding is a job frequently left to minoritized groups: the past twenty years have witnessed significant increase in seminars, symposia, round tables exploring the big ‘challenge’ of diversity. These events in which members of those groups the cultural sector recognises it fails to include, cater for and represent, share their experiences are ultimately examples of ‘epistemic exploitation’ (Berenstain, 2016, p. 570):

Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face ... It maintains structures of oppression by centering the needs and desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups who are required to do the unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons who demand it—and who benefit from those very oppressive systems about which they demand to be educated.

The past 70 years have witnessed countless initiatives to ‘diversify’ culture, to make it more inclusive, accessible, representative, relevant, impactful, etc., but strictly within the confines of the existing policy framework (H. Gray, 2016; Saha, 2018; Westermann et al., 2019). Change has been advocated, strategized for, promoted in policy documents and new initiatives, but without dealing with the fact that a cultural and funding infrastructure which legitimises social relations of inequality cannot accommodate within itself an oppositional cultural politics and its attendant resistance to domination, unless these are eviscerated of their radical potential for change and transformation, and turned into perfunctory tokenism. The depoliticisation of these debates is particularly problematic in a political climate that has seen, across the globe, a marked shift from ‘*having* a market economy to *being* a market society’ (Sandel, 2012, n/a).

### **On the non-negotiability of self-reflexivity**

An initial consideration of these issues shows that, as academic researchers, we must be mindful of our own ideological biases and commitments. As much as academics would like to believe otherwise, you cannot hope to transcend or dismantle dominant epistemological & conceptual paradigms purely on the level of ideas alone. You have to disrupt the material systems which continue to enforce & legitimate them. Berland’s (2011, p. 227) term, ‘cruel optimism’, usefully articulates the affective attachment to ‘The exhausting repetition of the politically depressed position that seeks repair of what may be constitutively broken’. The so-called ‘problem of reflexivity’ in social sciences is therefore central because, ‘[h]ow our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others is and has always been our topic.’ (Denzin, 1996, p. 27) This ‘topic’ therefore requires some attention, especially in a field such as cultural policy studies, dominated by researchers (and we include ourselves in this grouping) who are invested in the value of the arts, culture and in

the improvement of interventions to regulate the funding, workings and characteristics of the cultural sector in different national and socio-cultural contexts.

In her review of the reflexivity literature, Dowling (2006) identifies a range of different forms of reflexivity, including 'epistemological reflexivity', reflexivity based on the 'politics of location', and reflexivity from a feminist standpoint, focused on 'positioning'. As Dowling (2006, p. 11) explains, 'epistemological reflexivity' requires the researcher to ask how research questions are formulated and how assumptions made during the research may impact upon findings. In terms of the argument presented in this article, the concept of epistemological reflexivity alerts us to the need to acknowledge that, as with any discussion of cultural value, the focus is on questions of cultural authority, power, voice and representation (Belfiore, 2020). These questions are framed differently in the various discourses of cultural democracy, diversity and cultural equity. This leads to debates that share some common traits, but also significant variances. In the UK tradition, the consideration of cultural authority in shaping the national cultural landscape, its institutions and the processes of cultural production has historically tended to focus on class (Belfiore, 2019). Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013) have lamented the relative neglect of questions of race and racism in research of cultural production in Britain. In the US, in the wake of the civil rights movement and its ongoing fight to address the legacy of official and institutionalised racial discrimination, racial equity has surged to greater prominence (B.M. Heidelberg, 2019; B. Heidelberg, 2020; Westermann et al., 2019).

The need for self-reflexivity is also required by practitioners in the cultural sector, where personal and professional identities can be merged and embedded in cultural capital (Dubois, 2016). Such professional positioning both masks and may obstruct necessary reflection on the role of the cultural sector in perpetuating inequality. This brings us to the notion of reflexivity predicated on a politics of location, based on 'an examination of the political and social constructions that inform the research process' (although the point is equally valid for policy discourse), and that addresses 'the inter-personal and institutional contexts of research and the way data analysis methods are used' (Dowling, 2006, pp. 12–13). A significant proportion of social justice debates are currently being played out within the cultural sector (as opposed to being confined to the academy): creative practitioners and administrators have begun to publicly acknowledge and discuss how best to address the inequalities that are embedded and reproduced by the mechanisms of cultural production and the mediated facilitation of personal creation and consumption (Carey et al., 2021; Henry & Ryder, 2021). There is now widespread and public recognition of the ways in which public cultural institutions work to embed, reinforce and reproduce a trans-generational 'legitimate culture' and, by the same token, the misrecognition of minority and subaltern voices (Belfiore, 2020; Jordan & Weedon, 1995).

We should of course be mindful that frequently the voices who are curating, participating in, and leading the conversations on diversifying, decolonising, or, most recently 'resetting' our culture (Culture Reset, 2020), tend to be established cultural leaders, often based in nationally funded organisations with the heft of tradition, reputation, and cultural authority behind them. Across the cultural and heritage fields, many of these institutions attained such positions through historical and often largely undocumented forms of oppression (Hicks, 2020; Huxtable et al., 2020; Insaf, 2020). The extent to which this process should be entrusted to those who have benefited most from the inequities of



the status quo is an urgent question. Thiarai (2020) argues that, '[w]e need to relinquish power where we have it and create space for new possibilities, if we truly seek to encourage cultural democracy' (n/a). It is therefore important to maintain our focus on the positionality of those both researching and 'doing' cultural equality struggles. Similarly, our understanding of reflexivity needs to be sensitive to the fact that individual identities are complex, resulting as they do from the intersecting and mutually reinforcing axes of race, class, gender, sexuality and physical ability. As the theorist of 'intersectionality', Crenshaw (1989: 139) put it, we need to acknowledge and address the *multi-dimensionality* of marginalised subjects' identities and lived experiences, or we risk 'marginalis[ing] those who are multiply-burdened'.

This complexity is too often obscured or ignored as the sector enthusiastically rallies to 'diversify' and 'decolonise' itself (or, at least, to discuss – amidst an abundance of facilitators, flipcharts and post-it notes – how a more equal sector might be achieved).

### Performative radicalism

The third main form of reflexivity discussed by Dowling (2006, p. 13) focuses on 'positioning' and has been particularly central to feminist scholarship. This approach places particular attention on the power differentials at play in the reality that is being studied, as well as between the researcher(s) and the researched. Feminist scholarship is especially concerned with gender-based inequalities, but this approach can equally be extended to other forms of power inequality. 'Standpoint reflexivity' (Denzin, 1996, p. 220) is predicated on the awareness that all texts 'are shaped by the writer's standpoint, by one's location within culture, history, and by the structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, family, and nation'. Quoting Marcus (1994, in Denzin, 1996), Denzin explains that this approach entails recognising the 'situatedness and partiality of all claims to knowledge' (p. 220) and how they bring with them hidden agendas, interests, assumptions, the marks of privilege, or conversely, the marks of exclusion and misrecognition.

Dealing adequately with the standpoint question is not easy, and we are mindful of the concerns raised within feminist scholarship itself. Patai (1991) highlights the limitations of a popular way to deal with researcher/observer positioning, which is to situate oneself, and declare one's positionality from the outset, 'by prior announcement': e.g. "As a white working-class heterosexual ...", or 'As a black feminist activist ...' (pp.149–150). Patai suggests that whilst such declarations of social positioning might sound *prima facie* defensive, they are 'deployed as badges' (ibid.). Such deployment is both not entirely honest and potentially distracting, as it poses the risk that the question of 'What is to be done?' might be replaced by 'Who am I?':

[...] for the underlying assumption seems to be that by such identification one has paid one's respects to "difference" – owned up to bias, acknowledged privilege, or taken possession of oppression – and is now home free.. (Patai, 1991, p. 149)

Directly connected to a focus on the optics of actors' positionality and the desire to make strong statements in favour of equity, inclusion and diversity is the resultant risk of largely performative statements, manifestos, reports and events. These position the authors (whether researchers or cultural professionals/institutions) as champions of progressive cultural politics at the expense of developing a clear roadmap to actual change. Here

'performative' is to be understood in its meaning of purely symbolic and largely tokenistic 'showing doing', after Schechner (2013) – whereby the aim is to create the *impression* of doing, over and above any *actual* doing. Henry and Ryder (2021) refer to such consultative processes as 'like a big, velvety group hug. It feels nice, but it doesn't change anything' (p. 29).

This is the phenomenon that Anselmi and Wilson (2009) refer to as 'performative radicalism' and which produces 'self-promoting work' based on an 'optical personage' (the way in which the activist presents themselves and their political stance in the work) which 'does not produce social change' (p. 44). This performative radicalism relies on 'practices of narcissism', such that:

[T]he optic personage performs social activism so as to become a new point of aggregation for potential activists through an implementation of post-political action – predominantly rhetorical – that conflates the historical political dialectic. (Anselmi & Wilson, 2009, p. 44)

Such work bears the aura of activism and of social responsibility but (re)presents no real danger to the status quo; in fact, it reinforces the status quo by implicitly suggesting that inequalities are being addressed and redressed, and that the resulting situation is therefore what genuine meritocracy in action looks like, all the while reproducing and preserving original injustices, or placing the burden of change on the minoritized groups these activities are meant to benefit (see, B.M. Heidelberg, 2019). As Kolbe (2021) shows in a German context, diversity work can be outsourced to minoritised producers while being harnessed by elite actors. Such (potentially well-intentioned) work thereby risks being commodified into race and elite-making approaches which retain and reinforce institutional whiteness.

Many cultural organisations have created cultural equity statements while failing to acknowledge their own ongoing histories of perpetrating oppression and failing to engage in the required work of dismantling oppressive systems within their organisations and their communities. For example, some organisations that had received grant funding to create organisational and community change, in the wake of the pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, seemed to step back from their commitments: the Walton Family Foundation and Ford Foundation, among others, removed restrictions on funding specifically designed to help diversify arts museum leadership to allow grantees to use those funds towards general operating costs. The message sent by such actions is clear: the work of building equity is not essential, but rather a 'frill' to be cut when the going gets tough. This is indeed one of the ways in which the global pandemic of 2020–21 is set to push back the already modest advances of diversity and cultural equity achieved in the arts and creative industries over the past two decades (Eikhof, 2020). To compound things, 'speaking up' and pressing for diversity, equity and a more democratic approach to cultural planning and funding is a job too often left for minoritized groups: seminars, symposia, round tables exploring the big 'challenge' of diversity in which members of those groups the cultural sector recognises it fails to include, cater for and represent share their experiences, which have mushroomed over the past 20 years, are ultimately examples of 'epistemic exploitation' (Berenstain, 2016, 570):

Epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face.

Epistemic exploitation is a variety of epistemic oppression marked by unrecognized, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labor. It maintains structures of oppression by centering the needs and desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups who are required to do the unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons who demand it—and who benefit from those very oppressive systems about which they demand to be educated.

In this perspective, it becomes easier to see that the failure of the democratic and equality ideals within cultural policy are, in fact, a direct consequence of the unwillingness, on the part cultural actors, to acknowledge their positionality and privilege within the power struggles over the allocation of cultural value, voice and resources that are inherent to the cultural sphere and, most crucially, their determination not to let go of their power in any meaningful way.

'Performative wokeness' is the outcome of this, whereby it is the performance of social awareness that surges to centre stage, with its attendant reliance on 'social justice buzzwords', such as, for instance, 'intersectionality, marginalized, discourse, subjectivity' (J.M. Gray, 2018):

Performing such awareness means signaling values, acting as if you've got to show that you have the social justice know-how — regardless of your actual advocacy or beliefs — in order to prove that you're smart, cool, and if you're "privileged," one of the good ones (J.M. Gray, 2018).

The problem here, Gray (Ibid,) explains, is that 'critical concepts become tools for bolstering our own self-image and earning each others' approval'. As Whiteout (2018: 63) observes, '[w]okeness is not an awareness level reached; it is an orientation to the world predicated on prioritizing the experiences of those often ignored and acting on it to do good'.

But, what if the acting on it, does not follow the public declarations of social justice awareness and the rhetorical centring of hitherto marginalised voices and groups? As black academic and broadcaster Emma Dabiri (, p. 11) comments:

The outpourings of solidarity and offerings of support that accompanied the Black Lives Matter protests made many of my peers angry, understandably. There were accusations that, like so much else related to black lives, this was a trend, that the black 'solidarity' squares that flooded Instagram were empty, meaningless, performative gestures. [...] We seem to have replaced *doing anything* with *saying something*, in a space where the word 'conversation' has achieved an obscenely inflated importance as a substitute for action (emphasis in the original).

Dabiri (Ibid.) goes on to observe that '[c]ollective goals seem to have been replaced by "visibility"', at the expense of programmatic clarity on how to achieve change.

### Why 'saying something' is not enough

The work of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed can help make sense of the perfunctory nature of so many declarative commitments to democracy, equity and diversity in the cultural sector. In her 2012 book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Ahmed builds on the work of Judith Butler on performativity, and J. L. Austin on speech acts, and

their understanding of words as ‘doing things’ in the world. Ahmed (2012) claims that institutional ‘statements of commitment are non-performatives: they do not bring about the effects they name’ (p. 17). She explores the difference Austin posited between ‘constative’ (or descriptive) utterances, which as the name suggests report on something, and ‘performative utterances’, which *do* something in what Ahmed calls ‘institutional speech acts’ and which ‘might make claims *about* an institution, as well as on *behalf* of an institution’ (p. 54). Ahmed (Ibid.) explains that, for Austin,

[. . .] a performative utterance does not report something: “it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (Austin 1975:6). If constative statements can be true or false, performative statements, Austin suggests, are happy or unhappy; they can succeed or fail depending on the circumstances of their utterance (for example, an apology would be unhappy if the speaker was insincere, or if a person who declared *x* did not have the authority to make the declaration).

For subsidised cultural organisations, the appeal of ‘non-performative statements of commitment’ on diversity, equity and a more representative culture is obvious. Indeed, as Ahmed (2012) explains in relation to anti-racism rhetoric in universities’ policies: ‘Declaring a commitment to opposing racism could even function as a form of institutional pride: antiracism, as a speech act, might then accumulate value for the organisation, *as a sign of its own commitment*’ (p.116, emphasis in the original). Yet these kinds of commitments, Ahmed argues, do not necessarily lead to any actual change in the ways in which the institution operates. The problem is that statements of commitment do not bind the organisation to *doing* anything (even when staff with a genuine commitment to diversity press for internal change) and can act as a proxy for action, with the result that reality is left unchanged and unchallenged, and that ‘even commitment can become a tick in the box’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 118). Hence why Ahmed (2012) refers to statements of commitment as *non-performatives*: ‘they do not bring into effect that which they name. A commitment might even be named *not to bring it into effect*’ (p. 119).

The non-performativity of the discourse of diversity and the commitment to anti-racism practice thus comes full circle: on the one hand, impassioned declarations of commitment to diversity, racial equality, the value of everyday creativity, etc. are offered as a way to *go beyond* a tick box approach to diversity, which has often been credited as the real approach to cultural diversity and equality initiatives in the cultural sector. On the other hand, however, the reality of the ‘politics of documentation’ (Ahmed, 2007) that has accompanied pressures on institutions to become more diverse and less racist, effectively means that policy documents declaring a commitment to diversity and equality and a willingness to change the established ways of working ‘become forms of institutional performance’ (p. 594). The way in which this institutional performance manifests itself is twofold: as the ways in which organisations ‘perform an image of themselves’, which also double up as the ways in which organisations ‘perform in the sense of “doing well”’ (Ibid.). It is through the performance of commitment to diversity and inclusion that organisations that have made bold statements of commitment to implementing diversity find themselves reverting back to the tick-box approach that the statements of commitment in their policy documents were meant to eschew.

Consider for example, the rhetoric surrounding Arts Council England's *Creative Case for Diversity*, an initiative launched in 2014 by then Chair, Sir Peter Bazalgette, with a speech that he himself described as 'one of the most important speeches I'll make as Chair of Arts Council England' (Bazalgette, 2014, p. 1). The speech opens with a bold and unmistakable 'statement of commitment': 'Today I'm committing the organisation – which belongs to all of us – to a fundamental shift in its approach to diversity' (Ibid.). The 'fundamental shift' was described as follows:

From 2015, measured action on diversity in arts and culture goes mainstream. We have already had plans for this from the 670 NPOs that are being funded from March 2015 to 2018. They have all signed up to what we call the Creative Case for Diversity. This is their *commitment* to make their work appeal across their communities. Call it accessible programming, if you like. The Creative Case *requires* that diversity is not seen as an obligation but an opportunity – a long-term asset that will enhance talent, resilience and income. It *demand*s that our arts make progress in reflecting the nature of our communities; giving a voice to everyone, irrespective of background, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and disability. We *expect* the bigger organisations to play a leading role (Ibid.; emphasis added).

Despite the rhetoric of this announcement, signalling a commitment to real change, the most recent equality and diversity data published by ACE (2020a) reveal that very little progress has been made, with ACE themselves admitting that on diversity they 'can and should do better' (Hussain, 2020, n/a). The (ongoing) lack of change led current ACE Chairman Sir Nicholas Serota to acknowledge in the report's foreword that, 'this report has confirmed that Arts Council and the organisations we invest in are still not representative of this country as a whole. The long-standing issue of under-representation in both the Portfolio and the Arts Council has to be recognised and addressed' (ACE, 2020a, p. 3).

The first call for the lack of diversity in the English (and more generally British) arts sector to be 'recognised and addressed' dates back to 1976, with the publication of Naseem Khan's (1978) landmark report *The Arts that Britain Ignores*. Commissioned by the Community Relations Commission, the Arts Council and the Gulbenkian Foundation, Khan's report revealed a whole world of cultural activities that official culture ignored. As Hewison (2018, p. 149) notes,

Some were dismissed as "community art", some were dismissed as not art at all, but the report made a strong case for the proper recognition not just of black and Asian, but Balkan and Eastern European cultural expression. The term "ethnic" was introduced to replace the pejorative "minority", or provocative "black" arts, but in practice became another racial euphemism.

Progress, however, remains elusive and solutions unforthcoming. Change has not been any faster in film, TV and other creative industries (Henry & Ryder, 2021; Nwonka, 2020; Saha, 2018; Sobande, 2020). Forty-five years on from the publication of Khan's landmark report, and following several official statements of commitment over this period, issues of diversity and representation remain:

To address this 'problem', following on from *The Arts Britain Ignores*, the Arts Council has produced many reports that have each attempted to 'solve' the 'problem' of the 'lack' of diversity in theatre productions, playwrights, actors and audiences, offering 'solutions' through developments in policy and practice which have tended to sound remarkably similar to those in Naseem Khan's report (Daboo, 2018, p. 5).

The policy commitment to the ‘fundamental shift’ is a non-performative in Ahmed’s sense – it does not do what it says. More than that, the declared commitment to a fundamental shift in the operations of the Arts Council, the notions of cultural value and quality it operates on and how it distributes its funding is a way of *not* bringing that fundamental shift into effect:

... the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but it is actually what the speech act is doing*. Such speech acts are taken up *as if* they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name), such that the names come to stand in for the effects. As a result, naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect (Ahmed, 2012, p. 117, emphasis in the original).

In the UK, while progress is noted in governance and programming, change in the ethnic diversity of workforces is slow (Arts Professional, 2021). Inc Arts reports 18% of the organisations it surveyed increased the ethnic diversity of their senior staff, while 5% saw a decrease. A third saw no change in the diversity of their team at all. UK Music’s (2020) recent survey found that white workers still held 80% of senior roles. Black, Asian and ethnic minority music professionals held just one in five top jobs despite accounting for one third of new entrants to the industry, highlighting a ‘systemic inequality that needs to be addressed,’ according to UK Music Taskforce Deputy Chair Paulette Long.

There are numerous contemporary examples of non-performatives in the cultural sector. Claims that London’s Barbican is ‘institutionally racist’ (Guardian, 2021b) have come from staff who compiled dozens of alleged incidents that they argue illustrate the organisation’s failure to live up to anti-racism commitments it made a year ago (Barbican, 2021; although incidents date back to 2014). Alongside Tate and Somerset House, the Barbican responded to the worldwide protest movement triggered by George Floyd’s murder with commitments to address inequality within their institutions and posted three black squares on its social media accounts during ‘blackout Tuesday’. Inc Arts UK (2021a, 2021b), which elicited information from 75 of the highest-funded National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) and eight DCMS-funded sites, found 60% had posted a black square on social media in memorial to Floyd last year. Nearly 80% posted an anti-racism pledge for their organisation. As The Guardian (2021b) notes, ‘After criticism from staff that the squares were “performative”, the Barbican released an anti-racism action plan on its website signed by its managing director, Sir Nicholas Kenyon, in June 2020’. A similar situation also arose at the Royal Opera House (The Stage, 2020) who were internally and publicly criticised for their perceived lack of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (see Royal Opera House, 2020). Writing on the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity’s *Creative Majority* report, O’Brien (2021, n/a) makes the common-sense point that the work is not the end of the conversation on ‘what works’ for diversity but is rather ‘a challenge to policymakers, organisations, and individual creatives who might have been keen on the rhetoric but less committed in terms of practical change’.

The concern regarding both the recent revival of cultural democracy in the UK, and the ongoing focus on cultural equity in the US, is that this focus may represent a non-performative: a version of perfunctory ‘radicalism’ in the cultural policy sphere, with the attendant problems of widespread ‘practices of narcissism’ and ‘progressive look-alike’ interventions that result in much rhetorical activity but very little actual change. Such

a process would be comparable to a 'woke democratisation of culture', and represent the ultimate 'non-performative', in Ahmed's sense of the term.

### **The woke democratisation of culture as 'unhappy non-performative'**

The term 'woke' dates to the 1960s and originated within the US Black activist community. It rose to global prominence in the early 2010s, when 'wokeness' became part of the vocabulary of the Movement for Black Lives, more commonly referred to as the Black Lives Matter Movement (Whiteout, 2018). The concept of 'woke' started off as 'a way for black people to remind one another of the importance of socio-political awareness as a means of survival' (J.M. Gray, 2018, n.p.). As such, 'wokeness' was especially associated with 'courage, as embodied and expressed by activists and individuals who challenge discriminative power relations' (Sobande, 2019, p. 2724), and while its understanding in public discourses can vary, it usually includes 'reference to acts of resistance and solidarity in response to systemic racism, capitalism and structural oppression' (Ibid.). Yet as happens within capitalist systems, cultural and political movements that started off as radical and challenging to the mainstream are co-opted for financial gain, and by social actors for political credibility. The appropriation of radical language to achieve capitalist ends has resulted in practices of harm reduction and transformative justice becoming management tools. As Malaika Jabali (The Guardian, 2021) has observed, 'terms indigenous to our way of thinking or advocating get co-opted and distorted beyond recognition in mainstream society'. Performative wokeness – the performance of social awareness with an attendant reliance on social justice buzzwords – is the outcome of this:

Performing such awareness means signaling values, acting as if you've got to show that you have the social justice know-how – regardless of your actual advocacy or beliefs – in order to prove that you're smart, cool, and if you're "privileged," one of the good ones (J.M. Gray, 2018, n.p.).

In the cultural policy sphere, the resurgence of cultural democracy has led to confusion over terminology. Whilst a debate has long raged over the compatibility or irreconcilability of cultural democracy and the democratisation of culture (Evrard, 1997; Gattinger, 2011; Langsted, 1990), recent work on cultural democracy has evidenced less of a radical, political position (see, e.g. Braden, 1978) and more of a rhetorical disposition (ACE, 2020b). For example, whilst many in the museums sector question the political positionality of museums (Taylor, 2020) and argue that museums urgently need to reform themselves to remain relevant to contemporary audiences and communities (Black, 2005, 2011; Anderson, 2019), much of the rhetoric errs towards a broadening (rather than overthrow) of the cultural hegemony, such that we find Anderson (2019, p. 142) arguing for 'expanding the canon' and 'reaching out to communities' (Ibid, p. 146) whilst engaging with contemporary concerns (first nations, decolonisation, global warming) as a way to maintain social relevance. The problem here, J.M. Gray (2018) explains, is that 'critical concepts become tools for bolstering our own self-image and earning each other's approval' (n/a). For major cultural institutions this can become a value trade-off with the financial value of tainted corporate sponsorship calculated against the perceptual damage to brand value from negative PR. For example, London's Science Museum was accused of 'hiding dirty money' over a Sackler donation (The

Guardian, 2019a) whilst organisations including The Met and Louvre have removed the Sackler name and refused donations due to the family's links to the opioid public health crisis (The Guardian, 2019b, 2019c).

Considering the long histories that cultural democracy, diversity and cultural equity have in their respective contexts, the need to transition from performed commitment to action would seem self-evident. Empirical evidence on the ethnic and class diversity of staff at public cultural institutions, the cultural representativeness of the outputs of publicly funded creative producers, and on the access of the general population to the means of cultural production and consumption suggest that there remains a disconnect between rhetoric and action (H. Gray, 2016; Saha, 2017). The evidence suggests that the numerous declarations of commitment to greater diversity, equity in the arts, and the willingness to democratise and upturn established hierarchies of cultural value are, in reality, *non-performatives*: they simply do not do what they say. As Ahmed (2012) points out: 'If organisations are saying what they are doing, *then you can show they are not doing what they are saying*' (p.119, emphasis in the original). The gap between Arts Council's emphatic rhetorical embrace of the 'creative case for diversity' and the reality on the ground (ACE, 2020a) and B. Heidelberg's (2020) discussion of 'diversity resistance' in arts organisations in the US open up the possibility for critique of current democratising and diversifying practices:

[...] current diversity initiatives within the cultural and creative industries continue to approach the issue of ethnic minority equality through a culture of schemes – and the hyper-celebration of the latest initiative. This points to a diversity agenda performing as a marketing strategy rather than a method of structural transformation. Further, it resists a collective discussion on what diversity as a concept actually means – and if current approaches are still useful for responding to manifold inequalities (Nwonka, 2019, n/a).

There is, then, a need for reflexivity in both arts management and arts management education to address the widespread issue of those actors who simultaneously feel that they are addressing, whilst unconsciously constituting, the problem. Signalling but not enacting change suggests a merely rhetorical and performative adoption of democratic discourses through an approach as close to hegemonic culture as possible, but with enough activist rhetoric to be seen to be 'doing something'. The dissociative narrative at play in arts management across both academia and the cultural sector is that those in/with power discuss its redistribution without embracing the internal conflict of needing to give power up to achieve that aim. To paraphrase Butler's (1990) work referenced above, social justice in the arts is performative in that it is real only to the extent that it is performed: as such, 'social justice is an "act", broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of the good white liberal's psychological interiority'.

## Conclusion

Concepts such as 'woke' (Whiteout, 2018) and 'fakequity' (Okuno, 2015) derive from contemporary social movements and are used in this article as a lens through which to interrogate both the progressive impulse to perform change and the empirical evidence which suggests a lack of material effect. Each new generation of scholars, activists and practitioners might (rightly) seek to rename and repurpose concepts related to equity and



equality to feel a sense of ownership, and to contemporise ideas which, to new eyes, seem redolent of old ideas. But as researchers we must simultaneously guard against a meretricious linguistic neophilia which renames and redefines whilst leaving nothing changed. We should rigorously question what work is done to challenge cultural authority in the changing of these terms. This is an issue that strikes at the heart of how we are trained as academics. Across disciplines, an amorphous but frequently invoked sense of 'objectivity' is presented to researchers at various stages of their professional training. This is often accompanied by either the rejection or coddling of 'subjectivities'. What we need is a more robust sense of our moral duties as academics and researchers, and how they relate to our work, politics and personal worldviews. There is a discrepancy between knowledge production and what might be termed 'knowledge enactment' – 'knowing' is no longer enough. The knowledge systems that contributed to and continue to perpetuate unjust structures within a 'woke democratisation of culture' lend credence to the argument that global justice can only come about through an epistemological shift that guarantees cognitive justice (Santos, 2018).

As the evidence shows, much is still to be done for both the subsidised and commercial cultural sectors to be fully representative of their consumers and the wider society. It would however be amiss to conclude this discussion without acknowledging that, while slower than ideal, and piecemeal, change is happening largely due to the efforts, commitment and the emotional as well as actual labour of minoritized groups, and often with little or no support from public institutions or resources (see, e.g. Aviles, 2020; Jones, 2019). We are keen that these hard-won advancements of identity exploration and cultural celebration (see Otele, 2020) should not be obscured by our critique of the problems that remain to be addressed. Pressure for change has thus far come largely from civil society and individual creative artists, while public institutions are still to catch up and move convincingly beyond public statements to action. As Nwonka (2019, n/a) notes:

A political agenda for diversity must identify the issue as one of individuals being systematically excluded because of their race. This would render diversity as a question of social justice as opposed to an issue of simply "including" people of colour into a particular creative sector.

The history of political engagement with the problem of inequality across the discourses of diversity, cultural democracy and cultural equity has a common imperative at its root. The concern is that this politics is elided through inauthentic and rhetorical use of these terms and thus by 'fakequity' (Okuno, 2015). Whilst the trajectory of US discourse has been to become politicised/embrace political economy in moving to cultural equity, UK discourse has become de-politicised (from a radically political moment in the 70s/80s) as Arts Council England (2021) has seemingly rhetorically adopted cultural democracy as a policy position. The situation – acute in the UK and US – where the declining efficacy of established social and political solutions to combat inequality and discrimination, in sectors of society far beyond the realm of cultural institutions, suggests that, as Kelly (2016) argued, the arguments of cultural democracy still resonate. Moreover, cultural democracy must re-discover itself as a political demand, at one with a demand for social and economic democracy, and one that connects with global fights for social justice, equality and anti-racism.

As scholars we must also guard against replicating the imagined moral authority (the performative liberal wokeness) we intend to criticise. If critiques of cultural policy are to function, they should first and foremost be concerned with understanding how the subsidised cultural sector, its institutions and practices, are embedded in socio-economic and political relations of both production and consumption to determine how these practices reproduce and/or challenge dominant ideology and social relations. As Black American academic and activist Angela Davis (as cited in Daily Trojan, 2015) articulated:

I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity is a corporate strategy. It's a strategy designed to ensure that the institution functions in the same way that it functioned before, except now that you now have some black faces and brown faces. It's a difference that doesn't make a difference.

The oneiric rhetoric of 'cultural leadership' is no longer sufficient in this regard and must be grounded in a political commitment that seeks to reinforce neither operational, nor ideological hegemony – or even better, rejected in the name of *coalition-building* (Dabiri, 2021). To understand why the treatment of minoritized and racialised groups is an issue of social justice and not just inclusion or representation we need to shift from cultural policy to *cultural politics*. The need for a set of analytical tools to develop intersectionality's capability to theorise the inequalities of the cultural sector – develop an intersectional cultural policy – and to *enable change* is paramount. To paraphrase, the present cultural system can no more provide freedom, justice and equality than a chicken can lay a duck egg. Multi-scalar cultural policy structures can and should further cultural diversity, democracy and equity. To map out how they might best do so, new conceptual models and research agendas are required. The exigent demands of our cultural policy moment require scholars to look at these issues afresh in their pursuit of social justice and to move beyond what Meer (2022) via Berland (2011) identifies as the 'cruel optimism' of racial justice.

Arts sector diversity initiatives, to paraphrase both Butler (1990) and Schechner (2013), are self-conscious symbolic public acts which largely fail to make a difference in the world. As such, they are 'a performance within a non-performative'. Without reflexivity, the right-wing attack on liberals as being 'woke' therefore is hard to contest. Discourse without effective action – whether that be around class ceilings, social mobility or decolonisation – is meaningless virtue signalling that risks a potentially endless recursivity. The challenge for cultural equity is that you do not solve privilege by creating more, or a more equal share of, privilege.

## Note

1. Cultural equity statements are articulations of an organisation's definition of cultural equity and a declaration of their intent to work towards or uphold that definition.

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