Chasing rainbows? A recognition-based critique of Primark's precarious commitment to inclusion

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Abstract

This paper develops a dialectical critique of organizational commitments to inclusion showing how, as rhetorical gestures, such commitments are undermined by practices of over-inclusion and exclusion. It argues that these practices are not distinct but interrelated aspects of the instrumental ways in which organizations respond to encounters with difference, limiting the latter's capacity to open up new ways of being, and of organizing. This theoretical critique is illustrated with reference to two examples of Primark's recent treatment of LGBTQ employees and communities. The first, the company's recent introduction of a range of Pride-themed clothes and accessories, illustrates how inclusion is pursued through an appropriating co-optation or 'over inclusion' of difference. The second, the company's treatment of a transgender employee and subsequent tribunal evidence, indicates how Primark's espoused commitment to inclusion is also undermined by an exclusionary negation. The discussion draws on insights from Judith Butler's writing on recognition and precarity to develop a recognition-based critique of how the simultaneous pursuit of twin strategies of over-inclusion and exclusion perpetuates a reification of difference, examining the consequences of this for those involved and for the critical evaluation of corporate commitments to inclusion more widely.

Keywords

difference, diversity, exclusion, inclusion, Judith Butler, LGBTQ people, precarity, Pride, Primark, recognition

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Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing interest within critical management and organization studies in subjecting rhetorical, corporate commitments to inclusion and the ways in which these are enacted within organizational practice to critique (Brewis, 2019; Priola et al., 2018). This critique is developed with reference to insights from Judith Butler's writing on precarity and recognition as well as the growing body of critical diversity research within work and organization studies (Ahmed and Swan, 2006; Pullen et al., 2017; Zanoni et al., 2010). The theoretical argument that it makes, namely that rhetorical commitments to inclusion are undermined by practices of over-inclusion and exclusion through which difference is co-opted and negated, respectively, is illustrated with reference to a discussion of two instances of corporate encounters with difference. These are, first, Primark's recent introduction of a Pride-themed range of merchandise, a move that shows how organizations co-opt or 'over-include' difference, and second, the company's recent treatment of a trans employee as an example of how those deemed to be different are mis-recognized, and are rendered abject as a result.

The discussion of these two examples draws from material that is widely available in the public domain, and develops a critique of the ways in which twin processes of appropriation and exclusion undermine rhetorical, organizational commitments to inclusion. This discussion, and the analysis of the two examples, aims to critically interrogate rhetorical commitments to inclusion by considering how these are interwoven, in the case of Primark, in order not simply to reproduce inequality but to reinforce it, reinstating normative conditions of organizational membership whilst claiming to do precisely the opposite. Asking what kinds of practices these two examples represent, the aim of the paper is to show how, in the two processes considered here, when a commitment to inclusion is embedded within an instrumental, accumulation imperative, difference becomes reified and possibilities for other ways of being and of organizing are foreclosed. As we discuss in more detail below with reference to Butler's writing, this reification and ensuing foreclosure involves a strategic 'forgetting' of our mutual vulnerability, and of historically, socially situated struggles for recognition. In developing this argument, we contend throughout the paper that inclusion is not simply a practice that may or may not take place within/through organizations but is an organizational process in itself through which difference, and those who are perceived as different, are either reified as a marketable novelty act, as in the case of our first example, or are misrecognized and marginalized, as in the case of our second.

The discussion begins with a review of insights from relevant literature in three main areas of interest: (i) research on inclusion in work and organization studies, particularly within the growing sub-field of critical diversity studies, (ii) critical literature on the marginalization of LGBTQ people, especially trans experiences and identities within/through organizational life, and (iii) feminist scholarship on difference, particularly Judith Butler's recent writing on precarity (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013), vulnerability and assembly (Butler, 2015a, 2016, 2020). Insights from these three bodies of work are drawn together in order to develop a dialectical critique, one premised upon a relational, recognition-based understanding of difference, of the ways in which a corporate commitment to inclusion is undermined by the simultaneous over-inclusion and exclusion of difference. This argument is considered with reference to Primark's introduction of a Pride-inspired range of clothing and its treatment of a trans employee as illustrations, respectively, of an appropriation and exclusion of difference, in an organization that claims to be inclusive, enacted against the backdrop of a corporate commitment to equality. For clarity, the latter is articulated most clearly through the company's 'Equal Opportunities Policy', which states that:

> Primark Stores Ltd is an Equality Opportunities Employer. The purpose of this policy is to demonstrate the Company's commitment to an environment of equal opportunities to both employees and potential employees.
>
> The Company does not permit unlawful discrimination of any kind against any person on any grounds, including colour, race, creed, ethnic origin, religion, sex, marital status or disability. Unlawful discrimination is defined as treating any person less favourably than others would be treated in similar circumstances.
>
> All the Company's personnel policies are based on Equal Opportunities and fair treatment, ensuring the promotion and practice of equality of opportunity for all (Primark corporate website, 'Equality and Inclusion').[1]

In addition to the above policy statement, Primark is quoted as saying, 'we know our people are key to our success and we want to ensure everyone achieves their full potential. We are committed to supporting all our people' (Howley, 2019), further stating that 'if you look beneath the surface, at the beating heart of our culture, you'll find an unshakeable commitment to diversity and inclusion' (Primark corporate website, 'Equality and Inclusion').

As Acker's (2006, 2012) critique of the inequality regimes that characterize work organizations emphasizes, it is perhaps not surprising that, despite (or perhaps because of) an espoused commitment to equality, a company such as Primark would continue to engage in practices that perpetuate the opposite. For Acker (2006: 441), inequality regimes are embedded in the structures, subtexts and imperatives that constitute organizational life, they are 'the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities'. The ways in which these intersect helps us to understand why rhetorical commitments continue to 'fail' as it were, as workplaces articulate a discursive emphasis on equality at the same time as perpetuating practices and regimes that sustain hierarchical power relations, simply because the latter is what they depend upon for their sustenance (Riach and Kelly, 2015). This means that inclusion is practised, as we discuss below, through simultaneous processes of over-inclusion, through which difference is co-opted as an organizational resource, and exclusion, through which those differences that are less easily or obviously appropriated are marginalized and rendered abject.

Our account of this and our critique of Primark's practices proceeds from the premise that inclusion is a basic human need – we rely on inclusion as a sign that we have been recognized (for example, as the gender in which we wish to live, or as a valued employee/co-worker). This recognition-based understanding of inclusion, one that connects feminist writers of otherwise quite different perspectives, means that inclusion is socially and ontologically necessary as it signals a reciprocal acknowledgement of our underlying inter-connectedness. In other words, inclusion recognizes our need to live and work with dignity, free from domination, violence, exploitation and oppression (Benjamin, 1995; Butler, 2015a, 2015b; Fraser, 2000) within social relations of reciprocity (McNay, 2008) in which we open ourselves up to one another in a way that renders us vulnerable, or precarious (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). In practical terms, we rely on recognition to make our 'feelings, intentions, and actions' – our own and others' – meaningful (Benjamin, 1990: 12). Recognition provides a mechanism through which we are able to relate to one another and enact our lives, through work, for instance, on the basis that who and what we are 'matters' (Butler, 1993). The discussion below considers how this recognition-based way of thinking about difference contrasts markedly with the instrumental and exclusionary ways in which organizations such as Primark respond to difference in the two examples we examine. We show how these two examples do not simply 'call out' the precarious, rhetorical nature of Primark's espoused commitment to equality but more fundamentally, indicate how over-inclusion and exclusion are

dialectically interrelated; they are two sides of the same coin in so far as they both reify difference. They do so by profitably absorbing into corporate imperatives those differences, or symbols of difference (in the case of the Pride rainbow) that are most easily co-opted, at the same time as negating and excluding those that don't have immediate corporate value, rendering these 'other' differences irretrievably abject (in the case of the transgender employee discussed below). To develop our theoretical argument, and our critique of this reification of difference, we turn to insights from critical diversity studies, queer theory and trans studies, and from Butler's writing on precarity and vulnerability.

Diversity, difference and inclusion at work

'Inclusion' constitutes something of a transitional term (Zanoni et al., 2010), advocated largely as a response to concerns about the managerial co-optation of diversity but now itself in need of some reflexive rethinking (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Tyler, 2018). What we mean by this is that its introduction into the 'equality' lexicon was intended largely to counter the increasingly instrumental orientation of managing diversity as an approach premised upon a conditional inclusion of difference on corporate terms, one that failed to problematize underlying processes of 'corporate cloning' (Essed, 2002: 2). In this context, advocates of inclusion intended to re-inject a concern with social justice into organizational practices, and into the scholarship that informs and critically interrogates those practices (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004, 2015; Zanoni et al., 2010).

Organizational and academic enthusiasm for inclusion came about largely as a critical response to the extent to which, by the 2000s, discursive articulations of diversity had become overly associated with the business case for equality (Katila et al., 2010; Zanoni, 2011; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004, 2015; Zanoni et al., 2010), and with corporate accumulation rather than social emancipation (Ahmed, 2012; Pullen et al., 2017; Swan, 2010, 2016; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2009). A growing body of 'critical diversity' research highlighted how diversity had become a discursive mechanism through which difference is not simply classified and governed, but is 'made up' (Ashcraft, 2009; Dahl, 2014) – brought into being specifically in order for it to be appropriated as an organizational resource.

However, 'inclusion' arguably now also suffers from a similar cooptation by the same business-driven reasoning, as it too has become solidified in policies and practices that have lost sight of the more emancipatory impetus of its earlier proponents (Brewis, 2019). Of particular concern has been the ways in which organizations pursue inclusion conditionally, as well as its associated de-politicization of difference (Ahmed, 2012; Swan, 2016).

'Difference' is taken to refer throughout the discussion here to those points of dis-identification and dissimilarity that come to be experienced or perceived as socially, politically and ethically significant, and which are produced and reproduced in 'on-going, context-specific processes' (Zanoni et al., 2010: 9). In organizational terms, difference both reflects existing power relations within a given context, sustaining inequality, oppression, marginalization and discrimination, and contributes to maintaining, resisting and/or transforming those relations. Philosophically, difference emerges when the relationship between Self and Other comes to be organized in binary, hierarchical terms, so that the inter-subjective relationality that underpins embodied social relations and processes of recognition becomes subject to perpetual misrecognition, resulting in relations or circumstances characterized by the Other's negation (Butler, 2015b).

Ahmed (2012: 163) emphasizes this when she argues that inclusion functions as a technology of governance, a 'repair' plan as it were, through which strangers can be made into subjects as long as they 'consent to the terms' of conditional recognition. This process, she argues, simply makes those involved conform more effectively to the norms that have historically excluded them,

resulting not in genuine freedom but rather in an increased subjectification through negating regimes of normative violence. Difference, in this sense, operates 'as a strategy of containment' (Swan, 2010), one that individualizes difference and which, in doing so, undermines the capacity for collective resistance to the cooptation and exclusion involved (Young, 2002, 2011).

Raising concerns about how organizations, and their underlying imperatives perpetuate rather than alleviate this, critical analyses bring a concern with power, inequality and social justice to the fore (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015; Zanoni and Janssens, 2004), highlighting how inequalities are reproduced or even accentuated when organizations instrumentally co-opt difference as an organizational resource or strategic aspiration (Pullen et al., 2017; Zanoni et al., 2010). As Ahmed and Swan (2006: 96) have put it, this 'individuates difference, conceals inequalities and neutralizes histories of antagonism and struggle'. Further, corporate attempts to harness difference refuse to 'let the Other be Other' (Swan, 2016: 372), effectively precluding the possibility of recognizing rather than containing or assimilating the Other's difference.

What this suggests in practice is that some differences are more 'different' than others; those that are most easily co-opted are those that are attributed the most value and vice-versa. This attribution of value is not necessarily fixed or stable, but changes over time and place, with some differences becoming more 'fashionable', or marketable than others, as Tomlinson and Schwabenland (2009) outline in their discussion of disabled workers.

Taken together, what this suggests is that organizational encounters with difference involve, on the one hand, the latter's compulsion and commodification (Ahmed, 2012), and on the other, its constraint and containment (Swan, 2010). In combination, these twin processes mean that inclusion becomes an instrumental reification of difference on organizational terms, practised in the name of performance, functionality and instrumentalism (Knights, 2015).

LGBTQ struggles for recognition

A growing body of research on the organizational marginalization and exploitation of LGBTQ people has emerged in parallel and often intertwined with this critique of inclusion within work and organization studies (Collins et al., 2015; Connell, 2010; Muhr et al., 2016; Rumens, 2017). Much of this has drawn attention to the extent to which apparent displays of LGBTQ 'friendliness', including claims to authenticity, visibility and 'voice', constitute extended forms of organizational control or strategies of containment (De Souza et al., 2016; Hearn, 2014; Muhr and Sullivan, 2013; Rumens, 2012, 2015, 2018), rather than genuine commitments to social justice. Illustrating this, Colgan and McKearney (2012) show how participation in Pride events is often celebrated within corporate cultural discourse as signifying a commitment to LGBTQ equality, even though the level of involvement may be minimal, or the activism at stake highly individualistic.

Insights from this rich and growing body of scholarship expose the heteronormativity of organizational life and its consequences for those who identify as LGBTQ, highlighting the (re)production of power relations and organizational practices that continue to ascribe a normative and privileged status to heterosexuality, at the same time as exploiting marketable associations with fashionable causes. Priola et al. (2018: 732) in particular emphasize 'the fragility and contradictory character of the notion of inclusion' where 'efforts to "include" are often grounded on normative principles', and are largely instrumental in their orientation. They note 'how heteronormativity works, in practice, to moderate different modalities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer inclusion, *recreating hierarchies and binaries*' (Priola et al., 2018: 732, *emphasis added*).

Their work draws on a longer tradition of critical insights emphasizing that whilst LGBTQ people's experiences of normalization might share certain features in common (e.g. as a result of

perceived deviations from heteronormativity), trans people's experiences are both infinitely varied and distinct (Heyes, 2003; Kirkland, 2006; Rumens, 2012, 2018; Thanem, 2011). Ironically, then, it is arguably this distinction that can provide important insight into lived experiences of the dynamics, normative expectations and power relations shaping recognition, not least because for trans people, the desire for recognition is particularly acute (Rumens, 2018). By the same token, vulnerability to misrecognition, through dead-naming[2] for instance, is also a perpetual risk (Halberstam, 2018).

With its association with non-binary ways of living and organizing, De Souza and Parker (2020: 1) see trans as embodying an ethics that potentially 'disturbs and recodes' the dominant ways in which subjectivity is currently organized. As ways of being that are 'beyond dualisms' trans opens up 'new possibilities for liveable lives', they argue, lives that have the capacity to embody resistance (see also Thanem, 2015) and to rethink organizational life beyond binaries. Drawing on Butler and Foucault, they emphasize that for trans to constitute a social rather than organizational space requires 'some form of recognition . . . in order to become a signifier for a viable and intelligible subject' (De Souza and Parker, 2020: 10).

With this understanding of the significance of recognition for trans people in particular, and of the latter's vulnerability to precarity and misrecognition in mind, the discussion below aims to offer a dialectical critique of the ways in which this 'transorganizational' potential is undermined by, on the one hand, an instrumental over-inclusion involving a commodification or co-optation of difference, and on the other, a negating, marginalizing exclusion. We develop this critique by drawing on further insights from Butler's writing on precarity, difference and recognition and illustrate it with reference to Primark's recent introduction of a Pride-themed range of merchandise and its mistreatment of a trans employee, Alexandra De Souza, considering what both examples bring to the fore about the ways in which organizations pursue and practice inclusion. In doing so, we reflect on how the potential recoding discussed by De Souza and Parker is vulnerable not simply to the extremes of appropriation and negation, but to both, and with the same effects, namely a reification rather than a recognition of the Other's difference.

Towards a dialectical critique of inclusion: Precarity at Primark

Not all, but much of the literature referred to above on the oppression, exploitation and marginalization of LGBTQ people has drawn on Butler's (1988, 2000 [1990], 1993) performative ontology of gender, and her account of the heterosexual matrix. The critique of the twin strategies of over-inclusion and exclusion outlined above and developed in the discussion below draws specifically on Butler's (2015a) writing on precarity, and on vulnerability and recognition (Butler, 2016, 2020). The basic premise of this work is that everyone is dependent on each other in order to maintain a liveable life (Butler, 2015a, 2020). Yet at the same time, that dependency (whilst not the same as subjugation[3]) can easily become the mechanism for subjugation when recognition is *conditional*, for instance, upon conforming to heteronormative expectations, or on adding something of commercial or reputational 'value' to an organization. This implies, as considered thus far, that inclusion is an organizational exploitation of our need to belong, that is, of our basic need for recognition, a need that renders us simultaneously vulnerable and resistant (Butler, 2016, 2020).

Butler's discussion of our need for inclusion is premised upon a critical, feminist reading of the Hegelian dialectics of recognition[4] and a phenomenological understanding of the self as a situated, inter-corporeal 'relational sociality' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 65). It is the latter that leads Butler to argue that it is our ethical relationality – our embodied relationship of mutual interdependency – that defines us (Butler, 2000, 2016, 2020). In her critical reflections on the differentiating effects of the normative regimes governing this relationality, Butler argues that rather than

mutual recognition, these regimes render others usable, exploitable and 'eventually into waste matter, or of no use: always available, always expendable' (Butler, 2015a: 27).

It is in this respect, and in dialogue with Athanasiou (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013), that Butler develops her critique of 'dispossession'. Her account is premised on the view that a *relational* form of dispossession is shared equally (as a consequence of our need for recognition), whilst an induced form of precarity, as a condition of 'inequality and destitution, is a way of exploiting [this] existential condition' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 20) through a market (or marketable) form of recognition. This highlights that the twin strategies of appropriation and abjection outlined above are not separate, or parallel 'either/or' ways of relating to the Other; they are part of the same dialectical process of responding to encounters with difference that results in continued inequality.

In *Precarious Life* Butler (2004) reminds us that all subjects emerge as a result of mutual vulnerability, but this relationality is repressed ('forgotten'), or it is exploited and appropriated throughout our lives. This results in a form of precarity in which certain populations 'become differentially exposed' (Butler, 2004: xx) or more vulnerable than others. Hence, precarity or dispossession is framed as both existential (ontological) and ascribed (social), the latter as an exploitation of the former: 'we can only be dispossessed because we are *already* dispossessed. Our interdependency establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 5, *emphasis added*). Butler's (2016, 2020) aim is not to somehow 'overcome' the vulnerability engendered by our dispossession, but rather to find ways to reinstate, or recognize, our primary relationality as the basis of ethical practice and ultimately, collective resistance.

To sum up thus far, the critique of organizational inclusion outlined above distinguishes between, as Butler puts it, (i) the exclusion of 'that which gets abjected or foreclosed', and (ii) the over- or conditional inclusion of 'forms of life that are conferred recognition . . . according to the established norms of recognizability, on the condition of and at the cost of conforming to these norms' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 36). In organizational terms, this produces an alienating, abjecting exclusion on the one hand or an 'assimilatory inclusion' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 34) on the other. The discussion below shows how these twin processes are interrelated with reference, first, to Primark's recent introduction of a range of Pride-themed merchandise as an example of an organizational co-optation of difference, managing difference 'in' as it were, and second, to the company's treatment of a trans employee as an instance of managing difference 'out' in a way that perpetuates a negating, abjecting exclusion.

Managing difference 'in': Primark's 'pot of gold'

Rainbow colours have been a visual symbol of gay rights since San Francisco-based artist Gilbert Baker introduced them to his flag design in 1978. As well as the various different groups that collectively constitute global LGBTQ communities, the colours symbolize values such as life, healing and harmony. The flag is perhaps best known through its annual appearance at gay Pride events across the world. In 1994, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, a mile-long rainbow flag was created which was then cut up and shared with Pride march organisers. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a black stripe was sometimes added to the rainbow colours in recognition of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the LGBTQ communities. In the immediate aftermath of the Pulse shootings in Orlando in June 2016, rainbow banners were displayed at candlelit vigils held in many different countries, and rainbow flags flew at half-mast over public buildings and organizations. The rainbow flag materializes a set of associations that are globally meaningful to the communities for whom it is a point of identification, signifying solidarity and connection, and political struggle in opposition to oppression and exploitation. It is for this reason that the more recent association of the rainbow symbol with public support for health and social care workers,

and particularly what became known during the COVID-19 pandemic as 'Clap for Carers', raised concerns about both the de-politicization of the rainbow as a symbol of Pride, and of the struggle for fair pay and working conditions amongst 'front line' care workers, including those who identify as LGBTQ[5].

Since its earliest adoption as an LGBTQ symbol, the rainbow has provided an important semiotic focal point and political symbol, as an easily recognizable sign of solidarity that transcends cultural or linguistic differences. In this sense, as the association with health and social care workers during COVID illustrated, the rainbow's affective capacity is also its vulnerability; the rainbow aesthetic, with its bright colours and cheerful connotations renders it particularly vulnerable to co-optation and incorporation into corporate branding initiatives. And with this comes the risk that the sense of community, solidarity and identification that the rainbow was designed for and needs to convey becomes just another marketing, merchandising or managerial resource.

This is arguably what Primark were so keen to tap into when they launched a range of rainbow-themed range of clothes and accessories in June 2018. Sold in the UK, Europe and the US, the range consists of items such as T-shirts, shorts, face paint, bags, whistles/lanyards, badges and hats.[6] Designed (according to text on the Primark website) to be both eye catching and practical for Pride marchers, it was launched in association with Stonewall, the UK's biggest LGBTQ charity.[7] Yet despite this association and Primark's espoused support for LGBTQ rights, this corporate commitment to inclusion is both selective and instrumental, and LGBTQ activists widely accused Primark of 'pinkwashing',[8] referring to the range as 'an insult' (Duffy, 2018).

The launch, signalling Primark's widely (self) publicized association with Stonewall's credibility as a representative of the LGBTQ communities, was in the aftermath of the trans discrimination case discussed below. It presumably generated considerable revenue for Primark: the company retained 80% of the profits on full price items. That the remaining 20% was donated to Stonewall was much celebrated by the company. Referring specifically to authenticity, desire and recognition, buyer Glen Scott described the thinking behind the collection on the Primark website: 'from the start, authenticity has been key; we wanted to create a collection that's true to how people want to dress for Pride, but it also had to be practical and fit for purpose (which is why there are so many great, functional accessories in the range!). *It had to be recognizable and "proudly" Pride*, but it had to be cool and desirable too'.

Writing about the launch, journalist Marjorie Van Elven (2018) commented that Pride events generate huge profits for local businesses in major cities such as London, New York and Madrid, which is not surprising, she notes, given that the purchasing power of LGBTQ communities is estimated to be in excess of $900 billion in the US alone. Primark was severely criticized for (i) selling the merchandise outside of the UK but donating profits only to a UK-based organization, (ii) failing to donate funds to the UK Pride Organizers Network, which supports Pride events across the country, many of which struggle to secure sufficient funding (several Pride events in the UK were unable to go ahead in 2018 due to lack of funding),[9] and (iii) manufacturing products in countries in which violations of LGBTQ rights is widespread. Many of the Pride-themed products were made in Turkey, which banned Pride marches in order to 'protect public safety', and which is one of the worst countries in Europe for LGBTQ rights (Van Elven, 2018). Other products were manufactured in Myanmar. In 2016, trans woman, Hla Myat Tun of Colours Rainbow, an organization that supports LGBTQ communities in Myanmar reported being arrested, stripped, beaten and detained for two weeks under an archaic 'darkness law' for walking home alone at night. She reported that in Mynamar, 'the police see LGBTQ people, especially transgender people, as people they can abuse whenever they need money. *They see us as a walking ATM*' (England, 2016, *emphasis added*).

Whilst rainbow branding might help to raise awareness of LGBTQ rights, and even funds for LGBTQ charities (through percentage shares, for instance), the effects of global corporations such as Primark making symbols like the rainbow part of their brand are quite different from the collective displays of political and embodied solidarity associated with Pride. Equality branding effectively co-opts the aesthetic basis of the affective sense of identification that the rainbow flag symbolizes turning the latter into a corporate resource that simply capitalizes on LGBTQ struggles whilst writing them out of the story, or rather transforming the sense of collectivity and possibilities for resistance embodied by them (De Souza and Parker, 2020) into a transactional acquisition. The espoused, signified commitment to equality becomes conditional, dependent upon the contribution of something of value to the organization, or the purchasing of a product. With this reification of political struggle and affective solidarity, *reducing recognition to an accessory*, the scenario becomes less a concern with what Primark can do for the LGBTQ community, and more a case of what its rainbow colours can do for the brand.

Further, the disadvantages experienced by those groups that are not so easily or obviously co-opted, those that don't have an immediately apparent commercial value or such conveniently adopted symbolism (including, for instance, trans employees such as Miss De Souza, whose experience is considered below), are further perpetuated. Various discrimination cases and collective actions against US-brand Abercrombie and Fitch by Black and ethnic minority and disabled people attest to this, as does the example considered next.[10]

Even if ostensibly undertaken with the aim of raising awareness of LGBTQ rights, to support Pride and to raise funds for LGBTQ communities and charities, when global corporations such as Primark, given their reputation as a manufacturer and employer, embark on what we might call 'equality branding', and incorporate symbols such as the rainbow into their product range, it is important that they are subject to critique for the kind of pinkwashing involved. So-called pinkwashing of symbols such as the rainbow strips away the radical connotations of histories of political struggles, and any potentially negative associations of what it means to be part of an LGBTQ community (e.g. with HIV/AIDS awareness), effectively de-politicizing and sanitizing their politics. Indeed, this line of critique was mobilized via social and mainstream media, and by protestors boycotting Primark and demonstrating outside stores with Pride-themed window displays, in 2018.

Arguably what Primark tried to tap into through its rainbow range was the collective, embodied sense of affective inter-subjective connection that Butler (2015a) calls 'assembly', and which is based on a mutual recognition of the kind of shared vulnerability, or primary precarity, discussed above. Through this co-optation, a sense of equality and a shared commitment to inclusion becomes framed as an accessory that can be bought and displayed, a sentiment that Primark seems to emphasize on its own website, when it says that one of the company's aims is to 'make celebrating diversity and calling for equality *affordable*'.

In her writing on the dynamics of gender performativity, Butler is well aware of the constant threat of re-appropriation and of the vulnerability of subversive performance that seems to be played out here. As she puts it,

> Just as metaphors lose their metaphoricity as they congeal through time into concepts, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition *within commodity culture* where *"subversion" carries market value* (Butler, 2000: xxi, *emphasis added*).

For Butler (2015a: 197), assemblies consist simply of a recognition-based bodily presence, a 'collective thereness' (ibid: 197), enabling assembled bodies to 'enact a message, performatively' (ibid: 197) in a way that connects a relational ethics to politics. Assemblies are premised, she

argues, on a collective, mutual recognition of our shared inter-corporeal vulnerability (Murphy, 2011), the basic need that we have for reciprocation, rather than some reified notion of ascribed characteristics. Pride is perhaps a good example of what Butler means by assembly in this sense; a collective, embodied sense of connection in which simply being together, en masse, constitutes a political, potentially subversive act (especially in contexts in which being openly LGBTQ is illegal). But as noted above, this affectivity is vulnerable to instrumental appropriation, especially when its semiotic form (i.e. the rainbow) is so highly marketable and/or easily re-invested with a de-politicized set of connotations, as in the case of the rainbow's mobilization as a symbol of appreciation for care workers during the COVID pandemic.

In our discussion below, we consider a second example of how corporate commitments to equality are further undermined by practices that perpetuate exclusion and marginalize those forms of difference to which immediate corporate value is not attributed; to those who don't 'matter' in Butler's (1993) terms. Again, we begin from the premise that inclusion is an organizational process that is embedded within power relations and the desire for recognition, and that this renders those perceived as different, and difference itself, vulnerable to appropriation, as considered above, and to mis-recognition and exclusion, as considered below. As others have noted, this is especially the case for trans people who, perhaps above all else, often seek recognition of themselves as viable subjects whose gender identity will be affirmed, reciprocally, by others (Rumens, 2018; Thanem, 2011). The workplace can be an important mechanism for facilitating and supporting this process, but it can also be a powerful vehicle for the opposite.

We illustrate this with reference to the case of Alexandra De Souza, a trans woman who was employed by Primark until she was constructively dismissed following months of bullying, harassment and direct discrimination against her. Miss De Souza's circumstances are considered as an instance of exclusion according to the terms outlined above, and through which rhetorical commitments to inclusion are revealed as perpetuating the vulnerability of employees for whom the desire for recognition is particularly acute and precarious.

Managing difference out: Deadnaming, spraying and praying

Employment tribunal case number 2206063/2017, Miss A. De Souza E Souza versus Primark Stores Ltd, reached a unanimous decision in December 2017 that Miss De Souza had been subjected to harassment related to gender reassignment. De Souza is a trans woman who had been dressing and living as a woman for approximately sixteen years when she started working at Primark in 2016. When she was recruited to a sales assistant job at the Oxford Street (West) branch, she presented as a woman, using only the name 'Alexandra' on her application and during the interview. She explained that she was trans and asked for reassurance that her preferred name would be used. The night shift manager who interviewed her confirmed that the company would have to use her legal name (the name on her passport) for payroll purposes, but that she could use her chosen name on her name badge, and be known to colleagues and customers as Alexandra, although there is no record of this agreement and when she arrived for her first day of work, De Souza was given a badge with the name 'Alexander' on it.

The bullying to which she was subject at Primark included outing her in front of co-workers and customers, calling her 'Alexandra/Alexander' whilst laughing at her, and continuing to refer to her using male pronouns and as 'Alexander', even when she asked them not to do so (Webber, 2018). One of the problems that contributed to this was that, although De Souza's preferred name of 'Alexandra' appeared on her name badge, the HR system required use of her legal name ('Alexander'), which then appeared on staffing rosters and sheets, which were widely circulated. Also reported to the Tribunal was an incident that involved a co-worker spraying scent near her,

claiming that she smelt of urine, 'like a man's toilet', and discussing her voice as manly and as 'too deep'. One particular employee who gave evidence at the Tribunal had told an electrician that he could enter the female staff toilets at the Oxford Street (West) branch of Primark where De Souza worked, to carry out repair work as there were 'no ladies in there', when she knew that De Souza was using the toilets. Another staff member said that she would pray for her, as 'she's got evil inside her'.

In her evidence to the Tribunal, De Souza also reported that she had overheard co-workers and a supervisor laughing about her, saying 'She's a joke', and 'She has become the joke of the shop'. Referring to De Souza, a male security guard had also been overheard telling a customer, 'She is evil'. When De Souza tried to seek recourse through the company's grievance procedure, she reports being laughed at by co-workers and supervisors as she sat outside HR waiting for her meeting. After taking time off work due to the stress this caused, De Souza then resigned from her job (even though she was performing well, and had been recognized as an 'Employee of the Month').

The Tribunal found that, under the terms of the UK Equality Act 2010, Alexandra De Souza had been directly discriminated against on the basis of gender reassignment. She was awarded £47,433.03, including lost past and future earnings and pension contributions, and injury to feelings (plus interest). In addition to this financial compensation, the Tribunal ordered Primark to adopt and publicize a written policy to support trans employees (or prospective trans employees), and to amend recruitment, induction and training materials. They were also ordered to raise awareness of trans rights amongst existing employees. Not surprisingly, a spokesperson for the company said that 'Primark is an equal opportunities employer and . . . [does] not tolerate discrimination of any kind' (cited in Webber, 2018). Yet commentaries on the findings emphasize that De Souza was effectively 'bullied out of a job' (Stevens, 2018), and this was the finding of the Employment Tribunal.

The latter reports in its findings that the effect of the discrimination on De Souza 'has been severe'. She felt that:

> She was made the joke of the whole store. She was subjected to playground-style bullying and innuendo. She was called 'evil' and . . . when she tried to complain, she was told to calm down and that she was drawing attention to herself.

The bullying to which she was subject clearly caused De Souza considerable distress. She was constructively dismissed from a job which suited her and which she liked. The hours were convenient and the work fitted in with her University commitments and aspirations to work in fashion. The Tribunal found that the discrimination had made De Souza 'insecure about her gender identity *and her very self*' (*emphasis added*). She had described to the Tribunal her experience of 'looking in a mirror and not seeing herself anymore'. The Tribunal summed up the impact of this on De Souza's sense of self, concluding that although she had dressed as a woman for over sixteen years prior to working at Primark, she had now become self-conscious about it, so much so that:

> When she walks into a room, the first thing she wonders is how people will see her. She feels they will just see a man dressed as a woman. All her confidence has gone. She feels she has to constantly explain herself to people. [She] has been unable to work, and will be unable to work for some time because of the impact of the discrimination on her. She has lost all confidence in how she will be viewed and treated in a new job . . . The injury to [her] feelings is very severe indeed, going to her very identity and ability to function in society (De Souza and Souza v. Primark Stores Ltd., (Primark, 2018: 26).

The findings of De Souza's Tribunal illustrate an organizational environment and set of experiences that demonstrably responds to encounters with difference, and claims to recognition, through

negation and exclusion. In a matter of only weeks after this Tribunal reported its findings, Primark launched the range of Pride-themed merchandise considered above.

For Butler, our mutual, inter-corporeal dependency means that we are all vulnerable, but in a hierarchically organized society, some people are clearly much more valuable, and some are more vulnerable, than others. The experiences of trans people such as De Souza, for whom recognition was particularly important but poignantly elusive, illustrate this.

In practice, whilst we are all ontologically 'dispossessed' by our dependency upon one another, and by our need for mutual recognition, the materialities of our social, political and economic circumstances mean that we are not all equally or homogenously so (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). This raises an important organizational challenge, namely how inclusion might be thought about and practised beyond, on the one hand, the logic of exclusion to which De Souza was subject, and on the other, the instrumental co-optation of difference underpinning Primark's Pride-themed range. This challenge also requires us to think about what organizational forms an embodied, relational ethics of recognition might take beyond the negation or reification of affective solidarity that we have considered here (see also, Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani and Pullen, 2018).

As an example of corporate cultural appropriation, Primark's espoused commitment to Pride depends upon wrenching the consumption of the products involved away from the messy politics of activism, and from the politically problematic context of their production and the material and significatory supply chain through which they become objects of consumption and display (and, presumably, disposal). Within and through this chain, the rainbow becomes merely a floating signifier, which Primark is able, in part, to make mean whatever the company wants it to signify, in this case, a rhetorical, corporate commitment to inclusion and something of a PR rescue package, in the wake of the Tribunal case discussed above.

Hence, this selective appropriation of difference operates not separately from, but as dynamically intertwined with, the exclusionary strategy adopted in the organization's encounter with Miss De Souza; unable to appropriate or absorb her difference, she was constructively dismissed by the company, rendered abject and effectively, cast out. Taken together, therefore, these two examples illustrate that inclusion, as an organizational strategy, involves *both* (i) an instrumental appropriation of difference and (ii) an abject expulsion of difference that cannot be appropriated; inclusion is also, always, a process of over-inclusion and of exclusion.

Inclusion beyond reification: Recognition and the politics of assembly

Developing our critique of this, Butler reminds us how recognition 'designates the situation in which one is fundamentally dependent upon terms that one never chose in order to emerge as an intelligible being' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 79). This means that inclusion, as it is discussed here, constitutes a reified form of recognition because it is based on a 'forgetting' of our primary inter-dependency, and because of the costs/conditions attached to it. However, in a non-reified form, one wrested from this fixing and conditioning, recognition has the potential, Butler argues, to reinstate our primary relationality, not simply individually, but collectively. In practice this means that

> One of the most crucial challenges that we face today, both theoretically and politically, *is to think and put forward a politics of recognition that addresses, questions and unsettles . . . [market] mechanisms of recognition* (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 83, *emphasis added*).

To address this meaningfully, we need to ask: How might this be brought about, and how sustainable might it be if such critical engagements are constantly 'vulnerable to the co-opting forces of liberal, market recognition' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 85) such as those considered here?

Challenging as they are in the wake of COVID, embodied assemblies potentially open up, Butler argues, the possibility of a 'performative force in the public domain' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 196), consisting of a collective bodily presence. This 'collective thereness' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 197) enables bodies to 'enact a message, performatively' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 197), a message that signals 'a defense of our collective precarity and persistence in . . . *refusing to become disposable'* (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 197, *emphasis added*). In *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler (2015a) emphasizes that 'the organization of infrastructure' (Butler, 2015a: 21), including through self-proclaimed commitments to equality such as Primark's, is inescapably connected to the organization of the desire for recognition, as the former effectively constitutes an exploitation of the latter. For Butler, organizational forms that can 'avow the need we have for one another' (Butler, 2015a: 218) might pave a more meaningful way for the conditions of a more liveable, workable life to emerge.

How to bring this collective recognition about, and what form it might take, within and through organizations remains a salient concern, perhaps more so now than ever, for organizational scholars and activists. It has to be said that Butler is rather vague (at least thus far) on the precise detail of what form this might take, and how it might proceed; what she does emphasize is that such a recognition-based approach requires organizational forms and practices that presume and structure interdependency rather than champion 'inclusion'. As she puts it, 'only through a concept of interdependency . . . can we think a social and political world that seeks to overcome precarity in the name of liveable lives' (Butler, 2015a: 211).

It is in Butler's (2016, 2020) most recent writing that vulnerability is recognized as carrying with it the constant prospect of violation yet at the same time, also opening up the social, political capacity for connection in a collective 'struggle with the norm' (Butler, 2004: 13). Here Butler argues that a collective recognition of our mutual inter-dependency has the potential to re-affirm the basis of a politics of solidarity, and to work as a mechanism for 'devising collective and institutional ways of addressing induced precarity' (Butler, 2015a: 22). For Butler, rhetorical commitments to inclusion, undermined as they are by the twin processes of over-inclusion and exclusion considered here, has staged a 'war on the idea of interdependency'. In contrast, she emphasizes how plural rights are collective and embodied, emerging from 'an understanding that the condition of precarity is differentially distributed [so that] the struggle against . . . precarity has to be based on the demand that lives should be treated equally and that they should be equally liveable' (Butler, 2015a: 67), not conditionally 'included'. This means that the opposite of precarity is not inclusion, or independence, but 'a *liveable interdependency'* (Butler, 2015a: 69, *emphasis added*). The latter articulates a timely, recognition-based, dialectical understanding of difference that is not only distinct from, but is actively opposed to, the extremes of over-inclusion and exclusion that characterize the two examples considered. It has the potential to move beyond the dualism that constitutes inclusion as it is practised in these two instances of over-inclusion and exclusion, opening up 'new possibilities for liveable lives' (De Souza and Parker, 2020: 1) beyond the foreclosures of appropriation and abjection.

Concluding thoughts: The revolution is just a T-shirt away?

The twin strategies of exclusion and appropriation considered here continue to position difference as an appropriated and/or abject phenomenon even when, perhaps especially so, corporations make a rhetorical commitment to equality. Practised in this way, inclusion constitutes simply another semantic shift in a long history involving a denigration of the Other; difference is reified through one form of misrecognition – commercialization, or another – marginalization. Together, these two corporate practices constitute a reification of difference that causes considerable harm whilst

purporting to do the opposite; exploiting and negating LGBTQ communities, identities and rights whilst proclaiming inclusivity. Through references to being 'evil' and a 'joke' and through bodily violations, Primark defined who and what matters, determining that Miss De Souza's life was not liveable or workable in the form in which she had chosen. This compares starkly to the enthusiasm with which Primark's buyer refers to the recognition that is accorded to their Pride-themed range of merchandise, tacitly acknowledging the importance of identity and solidarity, affective experiences that their association with Pride and Stonewall commodifies. In this sense, inclusion operates as a process of reification that both 'contains' otherness and, as noted above, covers over the tensions and dilemmas of the messy realities associated with it.

Butler's concern is that inclusion 'seeks to *govern and enclose* subjectivity and relationality' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 66, *emphasis added*). The term itself derives from the Latin 'to shut in' or enclose (Tyler, 2018). Her recognition-based critique implies that what is needed, politically and ethically, is a destabilization of the regulatory ideals that shape this process and crucially, our susceptibility to it. For her, it is in connecting critical thinking to activism, through assembly as an embodied, ethical and therefore political practice, that this becomes possible rather than through normative regimes such as rhetorical corporate commitments to inclusion. The latter, she argues, is akin to a privative form of dispossession that, in Ahmed's (2000) terms, simply restates the 'stranger fetish' and is an exploitation of our basic relationality, foreclosing rather than supporting genuine recognition. Arguably, this is precisely what Miss De Souza experienced when she lost her livelihood and sense of self, as did the Pride organizers and LGBTQ activists, whose semiotic point of identification was co-opted, and who received no support or direct benefit from the commodities sold in their name.

Proceeding from this dialectical critique requires careful thinking about how organizational life might be made not more 'inclusive', risking with it a perpetuation of exclusion or (conditional) over-inclusion and a reification of difference, but *relational* where the latter is taken to mean open to difference, rather than seeking to control or contain it. It is in thinking this through that Butler's writing on assembly (Butler, 2015a), and on resistance in vulnerability (Butler, 2016) has much to offer.

So what organizational processes, what forms of precarity in Butler's terms, or inequality regimes in Acker's (2006, 2012), do the two examples considered here point to? In sum, what the examples considered here suggest is that, as a conditional, organizational form of recognition, inclusion 'is not in itself an unambiguous good' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 82), not least because of the associated costs and conditions attached to it. Arguably, the examples of organizational practice considered above expose the collusive contradictions at the heart of what companies like Primark call 'inclusion' although they may suggest a progressive attitude to the politics of inclusion and supporting Pride after the De Souza case. Rather, 'inclusion' is shown (up) here to be a series of practices that accentuate oppression whilst professing to do the opposite, exploiting our basic need for recognition. This suggests an urgent need to re-think inclusion beyond its current organizational and organizing form; that is, beyond a regulatory reification towards a more recognition-based relational way of thinking about, and enacting, a genuine commitment to social and organizational justice. This means seeing bodies in/as a collective alliance wherein 'the rights for which we struggle are plural rights' (Butler, 2015a: 66), so that our struggle 'seeks to expand what we mean when we say "we"' (Butler, 2015a: 66). This sets the basis and political context for a plural performativity in response to the imperative to be 'inclusive'.

In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that just as resistance continually runs the risk of appropriation (as noted above), so too do the kinds of exclusions and appropriations considered here contain some potential for change or for critical engagement. As the discussion above also highlights, formal procedures and recourse to protective legislation, as well as the critical capacity

of social and mainstream media to raise awareness are able to open up reflexive dialogue and the possibility of collective action. Perhaps more substantively, there is something about the kind of affective solidarity en masse described above that cannot simply be reduced to a reified product, albeit one with self-proclaimed emancipatory intentions or charitable associations. This 'something' connects to Butler's notion of assembly and reminds us that beyond the duality, and inequality regimes, of over-inclusion and exclusion, relationality and recognition are also intertwined. In practice, and holding out a beacon of hope, this means that the collective performativity of Pride and other similar events exists well beyond the reified form of a consumer object, or of an exploitative employment situation. Such forms of engagement recognize our mutual vulnerability and continue to challenge the abjection of those who are most precarious in organizational settings, no matter how much multi-national corporations like Primark might try to chase rainbows in their rhetorical, instrumental commitments to 'inclusion'.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all Primark corporate material is sourced from the 'Diversity and Inclusion' section of the Primark website (www.careers.primark.com).
2. 'Dead-naming' is when a trans person is referred to by their former/birth name without their consent.
3. These ideas draw heavily on De Beauvoir's (1976: 82) argument that our interdependence 'explains why oppression is possible and why it is hateful'; it is an exploitation of our mutual, but socially situated – and therefore hierarchically organised – vulnerability. They also draw on Hegel's (1977) philosophy of inter-subjectivity, narrated through the life and death struggle of the Lord and Bondsman, which forms the basis of Butler's critique of the normative conditions governing a liveable life (Tyler, 2019). In this sense, her writing overlaps with, but is distinguishable from, Guy Standing's (2015) critique of the precariat as an emerging class, discernible because of the growing number of people facing insecurity and uncertainty in the gig economy.
4. To illustrate this Hegelian resonance, Butler's recognition-based critique of dispossession proceeds from her acknowledgement that 'being dispossessed by the other's presence and by our own presence to the other is *the only way* to be present to one another' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 17, *emphasis added*).
5. In the UK, the rainbow badge was initially introduced by health care workers at the Evelina Children's Hospital, London as a sign of solidarity and recognition with LGBTQ colleagues and patients. During the COVID pandemic, six-colour striped rainbow flags (the same as the Pride symbol) were widely displayed particularly in the front windows of homes throughout the UK as a sign of thanks to NHS staff, and in support of the 'Clap for Carers' initiative. Whilst some organizations promoted the synergy between Pride and the adoption of the rainbow flag as a sign of support for NHS workers (see british-lgbtawards.com), others voiced concerns about the public display and political appropriation of the rainbow as a discomforting 'form of erasure', with a Change.org petition to replace the rainbow with a different symbol of support for health and social care workers attracting over 2,500 signatures. For further details, see Wareham (2020).
6. Of course Primark are not alone in 'Pride branding' or in marketing specific products and services using the rainbow symbol. For example, at London Fashion Week in 2018, in the middle of LGBTQ History month in the UK, the global, luxury brand Burberry launched a rainbow coloured version of its iconic 'nova' checked lining, literally 'weaving' an association with Pride into its product range. Other brands such as Smirnoff, Nike, Skittles and Oreo have long since nailed their colours to the flag with rainbow-themed products. Other retailers stocking Pride-themed ranges in 2018 included Urban Outfitters and H&M.

7.	Founded in 1989, Stonewall campaigns against homophobia and supports LGBTQ communities across the UK. For further details see: stonewall.org.uk
8.	The term 'pinkwashing' is often used to refer to a form of cause marketing that promotes the LGBTQ appeal of a particular product, service or brand, or organizational or political cause, whilst either reifying LGBTQ identities and communities (which are constructed as a somehow homogenous group or market, as a result), and/or sanitizing or silencing relevant political issues, notably histories of continued oppression, exploitation and struggle.
9.	For further details, see the UK Pride Organisers Network's 'Statement on Primark Pride Merchandise': https://ukpon.LGBTQ/2018/05/22/13284/
10.	See, for example, the case of Riam Dean v. Abercrombie and Fitch. Dean accused the company of '"hiding" her in a stockroom at its London store because her prosthetic arm didn't fit with the firm's "look policy"' (Topping, 2009). The court found in favour of Dean and maintained that she was wrongfully dismissed.

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