



## Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

# Get Rich or DEI Trying: A Curator's Log from the Diversity-Equity-Inclusion-Industrial Complex

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**Abstract:** In response to the social uprisings in the early 2020s, institutions, organizations, and companies publicly embraced notions of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion), which research shows has done little to address the fundamental ways in which these entities contribute to societal imbalances. Meanwhile, DEI has become its own industrial complex, upheld by and at the expense of people and communities that continue to suffer systemic marginalization. Rooted in this issue is the trend of entities embodying personal tone in their public relations as well as workplace policies and culture within these entities that compel employees to write and speak on behalf of a collective “we”—resulting in an increasingly thinned line between the Institution and the Self. Part historical account and part manifesto, this short essay retraces the rise of DEI, reflects on its contributions and ramifications to society, and imagines what it means to move forward as a people intact.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Museums, Institutions, DEI

## Discussion

We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, represents, at best, a Janus-faced duality, and at worst, the loss of our very souls.—Zadie Smith 2009, 133

In 2020, the world reacted to the murder of George Floyd and other Black victims of police violence with what was often described in the media as a “racial reckoning” (Quarcoo and Husaković 2021). Many people furiously demanded to defund the police, but the anger and anguish also reverberated across professional fields that had long been purveyors of institutional racism. Streets were renamed. Monuments were toppled. One by one, institutions and companies were forced to confront their troubled legacies that had been conveniently swept under their old, dusty rugs long ago. These entities—name brands, public personalities, branches of government, and arts institutions—filled our social media feeds with black squares and hashtags and stuffed our inboxes with pontifications about how, despite their longstanding roles in perpetuating widespread inequities in different areas of society, justice is central to their cause. Some of these institutions genuinely felt it was the right thing to do. Some did it to lessen the blow of public outcry. Some did it because they

thought it would sell. All of them did it as an act of self-preservation. In their moment of panic, in an attempt to placate the public, these entities began to echo the same acronym: DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion).

By invoking this acronym, they pledged to demonstrate recourse for their hand in enabling a racist society by showcasing members of their workforce and/or constituency who represent minority backgrounds (diversity), explaining that they no longer observed the supremacist and discriminatory views that their historic founders may have carried in their day (equity), and welcoming those who they historically excluded while framing this act as a method of activism (inclusion). The “racial reckoning” triggered an explosion of much needed racial discourse; yet, the dialogue was largely facilitated by entities and personnel who, for the most part, had no experience in the subject. DEI taskforces were convened to run DEI investigations and publish DEI reports. DEI hiring committees were established to create DEI jobs as a means to ensure DEI was observed in the workplace. Directors and CEOs sent e-newsletters to their stakeholders to assure them of their commitment to DEI by outlining their DEI initiatives. Entities emerged as DEI-coated versions of themselves, trying to bureaucratize their problems away. Today, the DEI-industrial complex is in full swing, energized by the belief that the way to achieve racial justice is to pour money into discourse, initiatives, and products (Zheng 2022). Bridget Read (2021), who reported on the newly booming industry in 2021, wrote “As more money pours into the diversity industry, the products and services for sale are becoming ever more abstracted away from actual workers in pain.”

Every industrial complex is powered by invisible labor, even if one of the goals is to increase visibility. In this case, the work falls on staff of color who were not necessarily hired to ghostwrite statements about the racial climate for their upper management but who are assigned to do it anyway. It falls on artists of color who yearn to comment about their craft but instead keep getting asked how their practice responds to this racial moment. It especially falls on those of us who have centered our work on social justice and community engagement long before DEI surfaced in the mainstream. We watch as the entities we work for scramble to captain a ship they have, up until recently, refused to board. Institutions that have long stood on the grounds of neutrality and benevolence are suddenly self-ordained leaders of DEI work. “The Smithsonian’s expertise, scholarship and collections will help our nation to better understand the challenges that arise from racism, to confront our difficult history and to unite to bring healing and hope for our future,” declared a joint press release announcing the Smithsonian Institution’s receipt of a \$25 million dollar grant from the Bank of America in June 2020 (Bank of America Newsroom 2020.) Three years later, it was revealed that the Smithsonian had failed to publicly disclose its collection of human brains that had been collected to enforce a curator’s belief in white superiority (Dungca and Healy 2023). The Smithsonian responded by announcing that it had created a taskforce to address the matter (Bunch 2023).

This is not the DEI we asked for—not that we asked for any of this. Institutions offered diversity, but they have instead reduced us to target demographics. They offered equity, but they have instead flattened complex social issues. They offered inclusion, but they have instead sucked us into their problems.

Many of us contribute to these DEI initiatives, not naive enough to believe they will actually bring about the change we need but not cynical enough to believe it does not matter somehow. We put ourselves on the line for the institutions, knowing that they have too many skeletons in their closets to “decolonize,” so to speak. We let them wear our faces and speak in our voices, knowing these ivory towers were built upon all the elephants in the room. I would even say we even love our institutions—knowing they were never built to love us back.

We are not the first or the last to work within institutions, acknowledging that the most difficult job is to contend with their sordid legacies while keeping ourselves collected (Luis 2022). We recognize that, by working in an institution, we risk becoming institutionalized ourselves. We have written and spoken “We” on behalf of our institutions so regularly that we must remind ourselves, to say aloud, institutions are not people. More importantly, we are not the institutions we work for. We enter these caves knowing the only way to avoid stumbling into the abyss is to keep our own lights aflame. In these moments of darkness, I ground myself by acknowledging that which should be obvious but which is vital nonetheless:

Their field is not your community.  
 Their mission is not your calling.  
 Their vision is not the extent of yours.

Never let the representation-industrial complex make you forget what you represent. Guard your heart, protect your soul, and defend your spirit. These parts of you deserve the white glove treatment. Institutions were established to preserve our precious specimens, our cherished artworks, and our treasured memorabilia—not the essential aspects of who you are.

## **AI Acknowledgment**

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## **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Adriel Luis** is a community organizer, artist, writer, and curator who believes that collective liberation can happen in poetic ways. His life's work is focused on the mutual thriving of artistic integrity and social vigilance. He is a part of the iLL-Literacy arts collective, which creates music and media to strengthen Black and Asian coalitions, and is creative director of Bombshelltoe, a collaborative group of artists and leaders from frontline communities responding to nuclear histories. Luis is the Curator of Digital and Emerging Practice at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, where he advocates for equitable practices in museums and institutions. His ancestors are rooted in Toisan, China, and migrated through Hong Kong, Mexico, and the United States. Adriel was born on Ohlone land.

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