

Selling diversity to white men: How disentangling economics from morality is a racial and gendered performance

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Abstract

Diversity professionals include business scholars, management consultants, diversity officers, and human resource professionals, who claim that the business case is about economics, not about morality or social justice. Drawing on 2 years of ethnographic research, this paper finds that diversity professionals sell diversity to white men—literally to obtain new clients and, metaphorically, to gain supporters for their practices—by performing economic rationality. In examining the intersection of economics and morality through the business case, this article argues that economic rationality itself is a racial and gendered performance. Moreover, insofar as diversity is a managerial discourse that employs ideas and models of the economy to design organizational techniques that improve business, it claims that through the business case, diversity professionals perform the economy itself. Thus, this research unsettles pervasive scholarly and popular assumptions that capitalism is intrinsically amoral. Finally, it characterizes organizational practices wherein diversity professionals perform economics as amoral and unracial as white economics. White economics, in other words, reproduces the everyday operation of neoliberal organizations as purportedly amoral, and hence, unracial and ungendered.

Keywords

Diversity management, economic anthropology, economic performativity, neoliberal capitalism, race, science and technology studies, whiteness

Introduction

In February 2015, I assisted Keith, a board member of American D&I,¹ with a presentation to a client, a multinational bank, in honor of African-American Heritage Month. American D&I is a non-profit organization located in the southern United States, which hosts networking events and

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