

Contribution to: A roundtable discussion of Kathryn Claire Higgins and Sarah Banet-Weiser's
Believability: Sexual Violence, Media and the Politics of Doubt

Believability in the diversity moral economy

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Believability has enabled me to think about how sexual violence intersects with 'diversity signalling' within the industrialised diversity landscape. Many of the book's powerful arguments can be applied to the construction of believability logics within 'liberal' public-facing organisational settings such as the university and the creative industries. In these spaces, liberalism exists as a dimension of functioning markets, shaping who is believed and for what reason.

The book draws the connection between #MeToo and believability. Running concurrently with #MeToo was #BLM, both heavily mediated, global movements cohering around the assertion of rights to visibility and recognition.¹ What has followed is the dual public enactment and re-enactment of an anti-sexual harassment and anti-racist performativity in what I term a 'diversity moral economy'. Sara Ahmed (2014) describes how institutional lip service is performed whilst sexual harassment and racism remain intact. In this way, 'diversity' functions as an industrialised product and public language in which social responsibility credentials operate, though only under neoliberal governmentality.

Rooted in a feminist, anti-racist politics, #BLM has been co-opted and commodified, with the performance of social progress co-existing alongside the reality of social inequality. Within feminist theory, liberalism has been identified as the very antithesis of a movement for women's liberation and neoliberal feminism as disavowing the latent structures of power and oppression (Rottenberg, 2018). Similarly, critical race theory makes the distinction between two kinds of anti-racism, liberal and radical, with 'diversity' as a form of liberal anti-racism that 'supports the violence of racial capitalism' (Kundnani, 2023: 7). Reed's critique of liberal anti-racism is that it is hinged on identity politics as an expression of a 'moral economy in which capitalist market forces are treated as unassailable nature' and where market value is based on 'what we essentially are rather than what we do' (Reed, 2015). These ideas help us understand the ways in which representational politics gets caught up in a moral economy of believability.

Banet-Weiser and Higgins illustrate the shifting (discursive) cultural politics that arbitrates who is deemed an (in)authentic actor, and how architecting innocence is entangled with sociocultural identity and the axes of power in hyper-mediated contexts. As 'the mediated economy of believability' (p. 35) moves, and the authors show that it does, institutions can place differential values or trade-offs between race and gender in the #MeToo #BLM cultural aftermath. One can even be privileged at the cost of the other, producing a new kind of moral crisis. The blurring of anti-sexual harassment and anti-racist performativity can serve as ideological cover for both the institutional and individual perpetrator, hiding structural violence.

For instance, *Believability* draws on the example of R. Kelly, whose public response to allegations of sexual abuse, and to media reporting thereof, was to invoke the idea of a 'public lynching', referencing racist historical patterns and motifs of state violence towards black men to claim his innocence. For Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 'Kelly's self-defence was an injurious misrepresentation with a basis in an awful truth' (p. 180) of racist violence that is unleashed on the poor and racially minoritised and the historical exploitation of racialised groups. R. Kelly drew on Bill Cosby (another serial offender) as a source of 'himpathy' (Manne, 2017), and his own case and subsequent #MuteRKelly movement surfaced for some black people what it feels like to be a 'race traitor'. For black women, who already have to contend with the anger targeted at victimised women who accuse their abusers, speaking out against black men's violence against them often means also being 'blamed for reinforcing negative stereotypes of their community and for calling on a racist state to protect them' (Srinivasan, 2021, 14).

At stake in R. Kelly's believability moment was the stereotype of black women's hyper-sexualisation. Many of R. Kelly's victims were black girls and young women, a demographic who are constantly located in 'border spaces [of] unequal power' (Hill Collins, 1999, 85) and almost unfailingly unbelieved or merely elicit institutional indifference. In contrast, white women are more likely to be located on solid believability ground, though this is conditional on how other forms of capital such as social class intersect. Banet-Weiser and Higgins point to the 'damsel in distress' case of the white woman Amy Cooper. On 25 May 2020, Cooper called the police on an 'African-American man' in Central Park, falsely accusing him of assault, seemingly believing she was being threatened. The encounter was filmed (and almost instantly went viral) on the same day as George Floyd's brutal murder by a white police officer. In the same year in the UK, Eleanor Williams falsely claimed via

Facebook that she was the victim of an Asian grooming and trafficking gang, self-inflicting brutal injuries to cement her believability. This was amplified by the right-wing press's incessant stories of Asian grooming gangs, though they later described Williams as a 'rape fantasist'. These examples reveal the connections between believability, social inequality and racial formation.

The book discusses how a white man's subjectivity and performativity (as two dimensions of the believability economy) are buttressed by gendered and racialised assumptions. The authors also invite us to consider the relationality of believability and thus 'a possible new redistribution of the "benefit of the doubt" as it relates to sexual violence, away from powerful men and toward those over whom they wield social and economic power' (p. 3). It is not entirely clear to me where a black man sits within this configuration or new possibility. For example, a black man's currency in the sense of being recognised as a man remains influential because of his relative dominance, utility and privilege. Whilst he has more routinely had social and economic power wielded over him, within the new diversity moral economy, 'black' has the potential to accrue new values and meanings. These spaces (the university, the creative industries) characterise how 'the fantasy of race' (Bhattacharyya, 2018, 5) is played out through racial capitalism, and where representational politics becomes the 'economy of visibility' (p. 27) that calcifies 'the importance of market forces in competitions over victimhood' (p. 184).

Here, a black man's subjectivity involves a new form of cultural capital and his performance requires a more flexible kind of believability labour. This new form of privilege can give a black man, a black perpetrator, a pass into 'the economy of believability' (p. 184), even against the wider empirical context of racial hostility and violence that he is more likely to experience. When it chooses to prioritise identity-based diversity-related efforts, the organisation acknowledges that there may be an opportunity cost – the value of what it will lose when choosing between two or more options.² Neoliberal institutions fetishise diversity as economy such that it can create a cognitive dissonance reliant on moral inconsistency, perhaps even 'moral blindness' (Bauman and Donskis, 2013), with its parallel 'non-performative' (public, policy, marketing) claims of zero tolerance against harassment and violence.³ Institution and individual are now co-dependent, and the violence that is entangled with the co-production of uncertainty is thus institutionally, socially embedded. What decision does the neoliberal organisation make to de-risk itself? What/who trumps what/who in the diversity moral economy if the new market value is indeed based on identity rather than on behaviours?

Thinking about this 'economy of visibility', diversity 'fronting' involves putting that black person (the diversity tsar) on the podium, even momentarily, in the blink of an eye. This props up an organisation's anti-racist credentials (although this is not what [radical] anti-racism looks like), expedient for its corporate social advocacy goals whilst not challenging the underlying structures of racial capitalism where race and economic systems can so brutally intersect. The fallout, the opportunity cost, the value of what is given up in this moment, can include the violence in its midst that becomes, it is believed, a price worth paying. Diversity management continues. It is not that he is simply subsumed by market forces and has no agency; the endeavour is far more collaborative. As part of the misogynistic backlash, he may even present his 'believability labor' (p. 155) as a form of anti-racist service, a pompous provocation rehearsed within the institution's walls. If his work pertains to ideas of social justice and he is skilled in moral exhibitionism, all the stronger his alibi.

Institutional culpability is further complicated by a recent resurgence of 'lived experience' testimony as a qualitative data practice serving the diversity moral economy. The idea is that 'lived experience' testimony, sourced from and performed by the historically disenfranchised subject, can deepen organisational knowledge and act as a resource for better understanding, whilst bringing rights to freedom, flexibility and authority to define one's own life. As with liberal feminism, which assumes gains have been made where they empirically have not, 'lived experience' foregrounds the individual and the private basis of struggle rather than the structural and systematic.

This links to Banet-Weiser and Higgins' treatment of post-truth crisis in public life; while 'lived experience' seeks to elevate marginalised voices through both an aesthetic and fantasy of authenticity, it can also bolster a believability that is 'affectively felt rather than empirically arbitrated by evidence' (p. 36). 'Lived experience' affords opportunity to reconfigure truth (given also that truth is a moveable construct) and stake a claim in a version of a truth, any constructed truth that can additionally conceal violence. The challenge is how to negotiate the relationship between lived experience and the shift towards alternative truths. Within the diversity moral economy, how can the use of 'lived experience' discourse lead an individual to be determined, though perhaps not because of any inherent believability characteristics, as an 'ideal believable subject' (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2022)? How can one refute a 'lived experience' and call it out as a technology of power that also has the potential to authorise the perpetrator to take cover, and be weaponised as a form of public bidding?

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Drawing on this book as a political resource, it is clear to me that the possibilities of violence and its resultant forms of believability hold no guarantees, either in terms of its perpetrators or targets. The feminist left can continue to productively engage with a scholarship and activism that recognises the role of difference in social justice research, including an uncomfortable truth of violence across race that can be obscured by the neoliberal (feminist) project. Who is believed, and why, is not racially neutral (or fixed), because that would assume a post-racial state in which 'whiteness' and 'blackness' are also neutral. To say all of this is to assert the right to agency, recovery and solidarity within a politics of intersectional feminism, critical feminist pedagogy and critical diversity. It is through these broad coalitions, in tune with the evolving cultural politics that shapes believability and truth, that we can together challenge the cumulative and residual violence of the believability moment.

Footnotes

1. Tarana Burke had a pivotal role in the development of the #MeToo movement, supporting Black women calling out sexual violence.
2. In 2021, the black British actor, Noel Clarke was awarded an Outstanding Contribution Award by the British Association of Film and Television Awards (BAFTA) on the same day that the Guardian newspaper published an expose of Clarke's alleged harassment of twenty women. Previously, BAFTA had faced intense criticism for its lack of racial diversity (#BAFTASOWHITE), pointing to its struggle in negotiating institutional Whiteness critiques alongside its anti-harassment policies.
3. Sara Ahmed talks about university policy's 'non-performativity', where policy stands in for action (Ahmed, 2014).

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