

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, *Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt*, Cambridge: Polity, 2023, 250 pp., £15.99 (paperback) ISBN 9781509553822

*Believability*, by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, is an essential text for anyone interested in the problem of sexual violence, feminist politics after #MeToo, or contestations around truth in our hyper-mediated and privatised public sphere. It asks what we might learn about the cultural politics of the present by reading the increased visibility of women speaking out about sexual violence and the growth of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts,' alongside each other. Reading this book makes clear that contestations around sexual violence, and sexual politics more broadly, are key to understanding contemporary cultural politics, and it explores this significance through the framework of an 'economy of believability.' This framing enables the authors to provide a compelling analysis of the present as a period in which the 'problem of "believability" is taking on new complexities and (potentially) new political implications,' particularly but not only in relation to sexual violence (p. 13).

*Believability* offers the best and most nuanced analysis of the cultural significance of #MeToo I have read precisely because it reads #MeToo as a central part of a wider historical conjuncture, offering an analysis of the challenges this new era poses for feminists. The book begins and ends with the successful libel action brought by Johnny Depp against his ex-wife Amber Heard which, as the authors note in the conclusion, 'swallowed the internet whole' in the final months of writing their book (p. 196-96). The judgement in the case came five years after Alyssa Milano's 2017 tweet launched the #MeToo movement and six years after the Oxford dictionary named its 2016 word of the year 'post-truth'. These events frame a historical conjuncture marked by three key elements: the 'crisis' of post-truth; the historical construction of doubtful subjects; and a mediated, profit-driven economy of believability reconfigured by the rise of popular feminism. The authors argue the pursuit of sexual justice requires a reconfigured economy of believability, involving a radical redistribution of belief and its opposite, doubt, along axes of power, such as gender, race, and class.

'Believability' has two central elements, subjectivity, and performativity. In the economy of believability, subjectivity relates to the possession or lack of cultural resources or capital which enhance the status of believability while performativity denotes the labour required to be believed. The two exist in an inverse relationship, so the more marginal one's subjectivity, the more one must work to overcome doubt. The book is structured through four key aspects of this economy, each of which is illustrated with a collection of case studies. It begins with 'construction' or media representation, using prominent examples of '#MeToo Media' to consider how cultural representations help to explore, undermine, or compound the 'futility' of women's speech about sexual violence in a culture that presents them as inherently doubtful subjects. The chapter on 'commodification' considers the growth of a sexual violence marketplace, from consent apps to wearable technology such as lockable shorts and drug-detecting nail polish, with the promise that women can purchase believability sitting alongside the threat that these commodities are necessary to escape the prison of doubt. The chapter on contestation offers a critical account of depictions of #MeToo as 'mob justice' while the final chapter on conditionality explores the way competitions around victimhood allow men such as Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and some women to mobilise gender, racial and class privilege in a competition for culturally-recognised and validated 'victimhood', noting that for women and other marginalised subject, this form of believability is always contingent and conditional. In each case, the authors demonstrate that the elements of the economy of believability are not fixed, although they are socially and culturally sedimented. It is possible, therefore, imagine a radically refigured economy of believability and doubt even as the book explores the mechanisms that seek to maintain and stabilise the current order.

As with any significant academic contribution, there are areas the book touches on where the analysis might be developed or expanded. In the last chapter, for instance, the authors discuss the case of 'Central Park Karen' to draw attention to the racial dynamics that have granted white women contingent believability, particularly through dynamics that demonise Black men as sexually violent (pp. 170-176). The following section discusses the campaign to 'Mute R. Kelly' to show how these processes rely on the disqualification of Black women from both believability and the status of victimhood (pp. 176-183). Reading these sections, however, draws attention to the absence of Black Lives Matter, viewed as both an anti-racist and feminist project, in the analysis of the historical conjuncture under consideration. The challenges it raised about criminal justice and truth in societies structured through racial capitalism sit alongside #MeToo and the politics of post-truth in shaping the current contours of the economy of believability, and their contestations, as seen in the ongoing centrality of race and historical commemoration and critical race theory in contemporary culture wars politics.

The book ends in an exhortation to begin to re-imagine 'the economy of believability for the task of feminist liberation' (p. 199). This political intervention is the driving force of the book, even as it carefully analyses the forces that work against such reimagining. One of the key contributions of the book is the attention it draws to the labour that the economy of believability compels. This labour comes primarily from women and others who seek to be believed. But it also comes from feminist labour that seeks to disrupt these economies. Examples of this include protests and demands to '#BelieveWomen' or the collective declaration thirty years earlier of women insisting that they believed Anita Hill in her testimony at Clarence Thomas' confirmation hearings. This book is also an example of that disruptive labour, and it is appropriate that the authors have titled the conclusion '#BelieveWomen, Revisited'. The final sentence therefore challenges their readers to think and act alongside them. In this sense, the book is not only a crucial contribution to feminist thought, but also an important step towards reconceptualising the cultural politics of belief and truth in transformative feminist ways.