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Serisier, Tanya (2024) #BelieveWomen, revisited: refusing the politics of doubt. Feminist Theory , ISSN 1464-7001.

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#BelieveWomen, Revisited: Refusing the Politics of Doubt

Tanya Serisier

Echoing the title of the conclusion to Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins' excellent book, *Believability*, I revisit #BelieveWomen here as a way of responding to the authors' closing challenge to 'begin reimagining the economy of believability for the task of feminist liberation' (199). I take #BelieveWomen as an example of a long-standing political feminist practice of building 'listening publics' (Lacey, 2013) that seek to refute the politics of doubt that sits at the heart of the economy of believability explored in the book. The concept of the economy of believability helps us to think about feminist listening publics oriented to belief as refusing the scarcity logic on which this economy is based. In so doing, they seek to disrupt and displace this economy, gesturing towards more collective, feminist economies of empowerment, empathy, and justice.

#BelieveWomen emerged following Christine Blasey Ford's testimony at the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Both the circumstances and the slogan echoed the activism decades earlier of black feminists, who organised in support of Anita Hill's testimony at the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. After Hill was described by Senators as 'having nefarious motives and a dubious background', the organisers of this campaign publicly proclaimed their belief in Hill and their solidarity with her, most memorably in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* which listed the names of 1600 signatories rallying together under the banner of 'African-American Women in Defence of Ourselves' (Crenshaw, 2018). Rather than participating in long-standing feminist activist practices centred on exhorting survivors to speak, and, therefore, as *Believability* shows, to labour in an economy stacked against them, both of these protests focus on the politics of reception and support. Through creating a 'listening public', a collective set of listeners insisting on an orientation of belief to women who speak of sexual violence, these campaigns seek to shift the conditions under which women labour in the economy of believability).

A politics that focuses on belief and reception recognises that the conditions of labour in the economy of believability are constituted through the construction and maintenance of listening

publics united through a politics of doubt. It also recognises that, as Banet-Weiser and Higgins insist, ‘believability is something *made*, and so always ripe for remaking’ (194). To insist on an orientation of belief towards women is to construct a media politic that is ‘more cognizant of sexual violence as a characteristic expression of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism, and so of the deep plausibility of all stories about sexual harms’ (194). It is a recognition that it is possible and necessary to move away from the current scarcity model of belief. To ‘#BelieveWomen’ is to reject the notion that there is only so much believability to go around and that it must be desperately laboured for by anyone who isn’t handed it by virtue of their class, racial and gender position.

To think of feminism less in terms of exhorting survivors to speak than as constructing a listening public that creates spaces for the ethical and political reception of that speech shifts our political focus from the individual to the collective. It means both creating our own spaces and discourses, and using them to influence and change the wider politics of reception. Crucially, it may also be the most effective means of enabling individual speakers to be heard. For instance, although most representations, of #MeToo focus on it as an act of collective speech, the power of #MeToo, I suggest, is generated as much, if not more, through the practices of listening implied in the phrase. To say ‘me too’ is as much to participate in acts of solidaristic listening, that seek to validate and amplify the voices of others: this is what produces the ‘too’ rather than simply the ‘me’. Without the listening, ‘me too’, as Alison Phipps (2020) has argued, reverts to the individualist logic of ‘me not you’ with its inevitable reproduction of the dominance of those white and middle-class women who are able to negotiate contingent forms of belief within the existing economy. The political imagination and ambition of feminist listening publics is not found within most ‘MeToo media’, which represents the circumstances in which women speak as relatively fixed and unchangeable. In contrast, feminist listening publics can enact a collective insistence that these circumstances can and must be different.

Challenging these circumstances requires rejecting the economy that dictates that only some women can be believed on the basis of their proximity to power. For this reason, reading #BelieveWomen through a genealogy that exceeds and precedes #MeToo is crucial, as it draws attention to the activism of African-American women who supported Anita Hill, well aware that

the compromise of ‘conditional believability’ was closed to them, and therefore that it was their own collective practices that would defend themselves and each other. Contesting the economy of believability has always necessitated contesting the unbelievability imposed through racist as well as misogynist logics, and as Crenshaw (2018) argues, we misunderstand history, and repeat the mistakes of white feminists in the past if we continue to allow race to be ‘politely ushered offstage’ in our understandings of, and opposition to, these logics. We can and should, therefore, see the #BlackLivesMatter protests as a key part of the ‘specific historical conditions (cultural, economic, technological, etc.) under which the believability of different subjects – and so, their capacity to speak “truthfully” – is currently being (re)negotiated’ (199). A major achievement of these protests was to collectively constitute new ways of hearing and seeing the stories of those rendered unbelievable by dominant logics. It has also drawn critical attention to the history of white women, particularly, leaning into a politics that relies upon conditional accommodation with dominant economies of believability, and demanded a higher standard of solidarity. Viewing #BelieveWomen within this lineage emphasises the refusal of an unjust economy of believability and the logics of futility that exhort individuals to make accommodations with this economy. It opens, instead, the possibility of disrupting it altogether.

Feminist efforts to contest the dominant economy of believability must involve a refusal to participate in the kinds of listening publics that distribute believability as a scarce resource within a politics of doubt focused on marginalised subjects. Doing this requires collective action to construct new publics oriented to, but also beyond, belief, to feminist liberation and justice for survivors. A sense of what this looks like as feminist action is offered in the origins of the ‘Me Too’ as described by Tarana Burke (2013), the movement’s founder. She speaks of how, as a youth worker she was approached by a young woman, Heaven, whom she had befriended and who wanted to confide in her. Looking into her face, Burke writes that she listened to Heaven’s story of sexual abuse for as long as she could, which was ‘about five minutes’ before she suggested that Heaven should approach someone else who could help her better. Burke writes that it was her failure in that moment to offer Heaven what she needed, to tell her, as a first step, ‘me too’, that, ultimately led Burke to found her movement, to provide other young black and brown girls with the response that she was unable to provide Heaven. Burke’s movement, significantly, is not focused on belief but on ‘empowerment through empathy’.

In a recent public conversation on the podcast ‘Because of Anita’ (Because of Anita, 2021) both Hill and Ford remarked on the inadequacy of individual expressions of belief, such as ‘I believe you’. These remain within an economy that presumes doubt as the norm. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins similarly note, the politics I advocate here is not about asserting belief in every individual context. Rather, it is about enacting a collective practice of response that insists that women are ‘far more easily and widely recognised as #Believable’ (194). As Anita Hill went on to note in the podcast, the role of a collective politics is not to exhort more women to speak but to provide the space in which they can be heard meaningfully, and this means, above all, combatting the economy of believability that Banet-Weiser and Higgins so brilliantly describe and critique in their book. Insisting that we ‘#BelieveWomen’ can be, as Tarana Burke and Anita Hill demonstrate, a first step towards decentring the economy of believability altogether, focusing instead on building empowerment, empathy and justice through the collective constitution of new kinds of listening publics.

References

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NOTES

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/09/female-andrew-tate-influencer-dating-debt-man-bills>

