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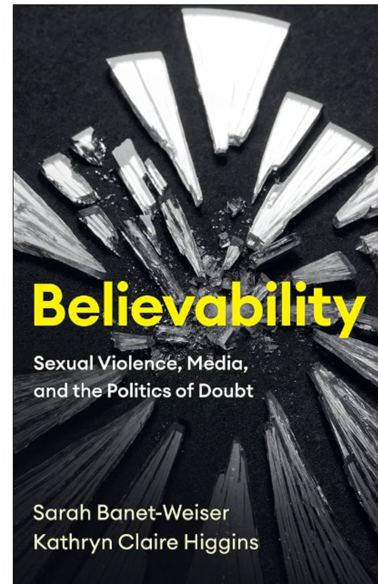
Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins, **Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt**, 2023, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 250 pp., $22.95 (paperback).



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In 2017, the year that the #MeToo movement became a global viral phenomenon, the Merriam-Webster dictionary announced their word of the year: "feminism." Just one year earlier, the Oxford Dictionary had revealed *its* word of the year; amid growing public anxieties about the trustworthiness of information and facts circulating in digital media culture, their 2016 word of the year was "post-truth."

The historical co-emergence of the #MeToo movement and the "crisis" of post-truth has been seldom (if ever) remarked on, but is precisely the focus of a crucial new feminist book by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Claire Higgins: ***Believability: Sexual Violence, Media, and the Politics of Doubt***. The book's premise is at once counterintuitive and deeply compelling. By drawing together two facets of the conjuncture that had not hitherto been theorized together, they provide incisive new ways of understanding the politics of believability: *how* and *why* certain people and groups are registered as "believable," while others are persistently cast as "doubtable subjects," in a context where trust in mediated information is now apparently in "crisis." The book argues that we must look to long, deep histories of misogyny and white[1] supremacy, *and* consider the conjunctural specificity of our current moment—in which digital media is the key terrain that is (re)signifying whose voices are to be trusted and whose are not.

The authors build on important work undertaken by feminist legal scholars, but argue that to better understand the conjuncturally specific politics of believability, we must also "turn to culture" (p. 199). Digital media is now "the primary site for the negotiation of 'believable' evidence and the performance of 'believable' subjecthood'" (p. 5). Within this mediated "economy of believability," we must account for the communicative architectures and commercialized logics that are specific to contemporary digital media, which, in comparison to earlier iterations of media, has a "broader reach and accessibility," is "dynamic and networked," and has "expanded spaces of backlash" (p. 5).

The book argues that to fully grasp the cultural force of the backlash against #MeToo, it must be analyzed in relation to its co-emergence with the so-called crisis of post-truth. Within this context, women who accuse men of sexual violence are seen to be evading the "objective" procedures and rationalities of courtrooms, and instead are pursuing "witch hunts," "mob justice," or "trial by media," and their "fake" accusations against men can supposedly flourish with terrifying ease. But while these powerful discourses claim that women who accuse men are disproportionately advantaged and emboldened by this new digital

[1] In keeping with the book, this review adopts the capitalization of *Black* and the lowercasing of *white*.

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terrain, the evidence suggests otherwise. The book opens by discussing the hypermediated, live-streamed trial in which Amber Heard was found liable for defaming her ex-husband, Johnny Depp. As the authors compellingly argue—against the prevailing notions that position accused men as the victims of such hyper-mediated struggles—the "public spectacle of such trials" tends overwhelmingly to afford men such as Depp "the greatest opportunity to restabilize the economy of visibility in their favour" (p. 127). On TikTok, for instance, the hashtag #IStandWithAmberHeard had 2.4 million views, compared with 6.8 *billion* for #JusticeforJohnnyDepp (p. 134).

As the book makes clear, false accusations of rape are vanishingly rare, as even official government statistics underline. But the authors do not, of course, call for any blanket, universal acceptance of any accusations of sexual assault. The book does not seek to adjudicate on the "facts" of any particular case, but rather to analyze how the broader cultural terrain—steeped in gendered and racialized power relations—profoundly shapes who is registered as (un)believable. The authors carefully elucidate and historicize the *intersectional* politics of believability, attending to how those men against whom false accusations *have* been made are overwhelmingly men of color.

The authors discuss the example of the "Central Park Karen" who went viral when she was video-recorded making false, racist accusations against a Black bird-spotter in New York in 2020, calling the police and claiming he was threatening her with violence (p. 172). This incident is situated within long histories of white supremacy and the disproportionate readiness with which white women who accuse Black men are believed. The cultural trope of the "damsel in distress" plays a powerful role in fortifying "institutions and practices of white supremacist violence under the guise of protecting white women's 'virtue' from Black men's sexual aggression" (p. 173).

The racialized dynamics of believability are highly context specific, a point that is further underlined in the authors' analysis of Christine Blasey Ford—who is white—and her testimony against (then) Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh (also white) in 2018, in which she outlined her case that he had sexually assaulted her in 1982. Despite Blasey Ford's obvious pain, tears, and the significant evidence she carefully presented, it was ultimately Kavanaugh who was officially vindicated by the hearing, able to frame himself as the "victim" of irrational "smears"; as we now know, he was duly made an associate justice of the Supreme Court. This case powerfully underlines how white women's "tears" do not have the same cultural power when the accused man is powerful and white.

For Black women and girls, however, the "damsel in distress" trope is simply not available in the way that it can (sometimes) be for some white women. Drawing on the scholarship of Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, the authors show how the enduring legacies of slave ownership in the United States, and the ways that Black women were "officially 'unrapeable'" for most of U.S. legal history, still shape the contemporary politics of believability. This happens through the perpetuation of the "Jezebel" stereotype; Black girls are often "perceived as being older, less vulnerable, and more sexually knowledgeable and mature than white girls of a similar age," as part of a phenomenon known as "adultification" (p. 182). The authors show how these racialized histories, in which Black women and girls are structurally *disbelieved*, are the crucial context within which we must understand the case of the musician R Kelly and his grooming and assault of Black girls and women—an "open secret" that he was able to continue for almost two decades.

He was able to draw on his financial and celebrity power, as well as leveraging the genuine history in which Black men in the United States have been falsely accused, claiming that he was being subjected to a "public lynching." Importantly, this appeal to the historically entrenched racism in U.S. culture has "a basis in an awful truth: that Black men *are* falsely accused of sexual violence and assault" (p. 180). But, as the book compellingly argues, R Kelly's significant success in cultivating a "felt believability" about his innocence was much less to do with an antiracist desire to redress historic wrongs against Black men and more to do with *misogynoir;* he could depend on a broader "unbelievability" around his victims' voices. These Black women and girls were "illegible as either 'innocents' or as 'sufferers'" (p. 183), not because of a lack of evidence but due to a historically-entrenched, misogynoirist public imaginary in the United States that has systematically positioned Black women and girls as not believable subjects.

The book's vital argument is that by shifting our analytical lens from "objective truth" to an *economy of believability*, we are better able to understand the persistence of injustice in the face of sexual violence. Crucially, we might then be better equipped to intervene. In this way, it is an urgent and deeply sophisticated conjunctural analysis, helping us to apprehend and understand a deeply knotty problem that has thus far been difficult to articulate, particularly as it mutates within an era of digital media.

While the book takes a necessarily critical approach to understanding how misogyny and white supremacy adapt to—and persist within—the conditions of capitalist digital media, it also draws attention to the complex, shifting, and often *unpredictable* conditions of the "post-truth" context. The labor of performing believability still falls disproportionately on women and people of color, and this labor is often intensified under the conditions of digital culture. However, we do now see white, powerful men *also* having to perform believable subjecthood in ways that this group has historically been able to evade. As such, while the book is not exactly optimistic—indeed, it is a necessarily critical analysis of the terrible persistence and adaptability of misogyny and misogynoir—it does insist on the "dynamism and mutability of believability as something *made*, and so always ripe for remaking" (p. 198, emphasis in original). In this sense, it is a crucial intellectual and political intervention that insists on sexual justice as the profoundly difficult—but deeply necessary—horizon of possibility to be struggled toward. The book is a significant, sophisticated, and deeply original contribution to feminist theory, media, and cultural studies, and more broadly to the public understanding of sexual injustice.