Digging in' and the challenge of redistribution for anti-racist feminist media and cultural studies.

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In August of 2023 a major media moment occurred (also discussed in the editors' introduction to this roundtable) that perfectly exemplified the argument underpinning Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kathryn Higgins' *Believability*. It occurred at the intersection of what they refer to throughout the book as the 'mediated economy of believability on the one hand', and the 'crisis of post-truth' on the other. The Spanish women's football team travelled to the FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand in July, under the cloud of a serious dispute between players and management which saw fifteen footballers step down in protest against their working conditions under manager Jorge Vilda. Nevertheless, the Spanish women's national team defied these challenges to take their country to a historic tournament win, defeating European champions England in the final in Sydney, Australia on 20 August. During the ensuing medal ceremony however, Spain's then Football Federation president Luis Rubiales took the head of Spanish striker Jenni Hermoso into his hands and kissed her on the lips without her consent, in front of the assembled world's media. Not only was this non-consensually intimate act broadcast live to millions across the globe as it happened, it also then went viral to a degree akin to some of the #MeToo movement's most iconic media flashpoints, many of which are dissected incisively and at length in this book.

True to script, Rubiales doubled down to defend his actions in the days and weeks that followed, despite the footage, despite confirmation from Hermoso that she did not consent to the kiss, and despite widespread condemnation of both his actions and his blasé response to criticism of the forced kiss, which he brazenly (but unsurprisingly) dismissed as "false feminism". This confirms for us all that the believability struggle is nowhere near won - the war for the truths of sexual violence and against the excoriation of anti-sexual violence campaigners and commentators as 'feminazis' will be one of attrition, for which we will need to dig in and dig deep.

The vividly-illustrated arguments in *Believability* thus tell us how believability continues to be negotiated in contemporary media and culture, six years on from the viral spread of the #MeToo movement. *Believability* provides a much-needed account of what the fallout from #MeToo is starting to look like. While perhaps not exactly at a 'watershed moment', we have reached one that insists on what Karen Boyle, in her expansion of Liz Kelly's (1988) conceptualisation of sexual violence as a continuum, calls 'continuum thinking' (2019). Boyle argues that as a result of changing policy contexts, developments in feminist theory over time and the extreme proliferation of discourse about sexual violence against women in contemporary culture, continuums of sexual violence must necessarily be understood in terms of their plurality, acknowledging where specific connections in particular contexts may sit uneasily alongside on another. She thus conceives 'continuum thinking' as a means to understanding the historically specific nature of the conjunctural contexts for sexual violence arrived at in the western Anglosphere. In 2018, we could not quite predict just how questions of believability would open out and multiply across the mediascape or how accounts of sexual violence would resonate in a conjuncture contemporaneously grappling with a crisis of 'post-truth' as central to the billowing mediated economy. Examples in this book encompass the ways in which Hollywood attempts to reckon with itself via the production of #MeToo narratives in both true crime and entertainment media fictions, as well as in fictionalised stories of real-world survivors.[i] They also extend to the market swell of anti-sexual assault products that at once commodify the gathering of 'evidence' while undermining believability, and to high-profile 'trials by media' whereby believability offers traction to perpetrators who shore up protection for themselves by spectacularly undermining their accusers.

Believability insists upon shifting focus from 'credibility' as it might apply to empirical truth claims, to 'believability' as a cultural war, the battlelines for which keep being re-drawn. As increasing numbers of women spoke out after #MeToo, so too have efforts to undermine their 'believability' doubled down. Banet-Weiser and Higgins firm their grip on this messy evolving complexity by proposing twin pillars of believability: 'performance' (the act of being believed) and 'subjectivity' (the positioning of the un/believable person). As performances multiply across a hypercomplex media landscape, they also encounter long-intersecting histories of class, race and gender which position interlocutors of assault in axes of power.

As *Believability*'s authors highlight:

> As with all economies, the positionality of subjects in the economy of visibility
> emerges as a product of labour and resources, which tend to exist in an inverse
> relationship to one another: the more resources a subject already possesses
> (including but not limited to various intersecting forms of social, cultural, and
> economic capital, and structural privileges stemming from gender, race and class,
> etc.), the less labor is required to secure access to believability through this
> economy and vice versa (29).

Therefore, 'making this a more equitable economy is an urgent matter for social justice' (191).
This message rings loud and clear. So, how should we dig in?

For us, thinking of believability as an economy generates focus on other sites where
marginalised groups are systematically disbelieved. In UK media, anti-welfare discourses
abound which mistrust claimants; [ii] black women are especially disbelieved when they voice
health scares and pain, underscored by evidence that more black women die in labour.[iii]
Believability is firmly rooted in social inequalities, particularly impactful in cases of sexual
assault. Race and class have closely entwined histories as marginalised bodies have been laid to
waste during processes of capital accumulation (Shilliam, 2018). This makes black women
'unrapable' (Hill-Collins, 2005) and working-class women 'sluts' as both are bound by the rules
of the political strategy of 'respectability politics' (Skeggs, 1997) wherein members of these
derogated social groups are required to exist and comport themselves according to white
bourgeois behavioural codes and standards in processes of racialized classification .

We see in *Believability* how hierarchies of value frame the game of believability: those who do
not show requisite psychological and physical damage are disbelieved, as 'harm' is difficult to
discern on an already-devalued body. Middle-class white women can thus exist as believable
bodies with value, and white male perpetrators can exist with all (or at least some) of their
capitals in place (e.g. Brock Turner, Kavanaugh). They retain credibility because from their
elevated social positions they have further to fall into social derogation. This close relationship
between harm and resources reveals the work of believability alongside the perpetuation of
social inequality. Care is thus needed in representing sexual assault so as not to reproduce
Pygmalion narratives that align believability and recovery to narratives of upward social mobility

for certain individuals as they fix in place bodies rendered valueless by the structural conditions of their existence (Wood, 2023).

To disrupt this economy, perhaps we can wrestle with the resources of believability by thinking of them as Bourdieusian 'capitals': the value of thinking of 'capitals' over 'resources' is in the light it sheds on how capitals get converted and *accumulated* in moments of exchange (Savage, Warde and Devine, 2005). By extension, we can conceive the possibility of capital *redistribution* which, following Nancy Fraser (1995), needs to be thought about by simultaneously addressing cultural *recognition*. The ways in which the mediation of believeability operate across a number of axes of inequality begs such an approach which articulates the way in which the cultural and the material are entwined. We might see the Spanish women's football team's reclamation of capital *and* recognition in their World Cup win to the diminishment of Rubiales as he is – finally - dismissed. Banet-Weiser and Higgins give us hope that since this field suggests such a dynamic and shifting range of possibilities, nascent in the cultural battleground of believability could lie the potential for *transformative* remedies which stir the very foundations upon which believability is built. Such an outcome is, however, fraught with difficulty and will need to be accompanied by materialist analyses which advocate for change at the heart of social structures. We therefore urge that Angela McRobbie's call for anti-racist feminist media and cultural studies analysis to reinvigorate its relationship with social policy (McRobbie, 2020; Littler and McRobbie, 2022) is taken up, which aims to reimagine anti-racist welfarist structures for social justice.

Believability lays bare how the mediatised terrain of the current conjuncture reproduces uneven impacts on bodies as many in the western Anglosphere, have diminished capacity to conceive of material lives beyond media. It will therefore take interventions in media *and* social policy to begin the work of an inclusive and collective re-calibration towards believability justice.

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[i] Relatedly, in the mediated believability economy of the UK, national broadcaster the BBC is currently engaged in attempts to come to terms with itself in this regard, having commissioned ITV Studios to produce *The Reckoning* (2023), about the lifetime of sexual crimes and abuse committed by former BBC television personality Jimmy Savile, raising questions about the extent to which the corporation was complicit in enabling Savile and in casting doubt on the believability of victims and survivors. Also produced by ITV Studios and showing contemporaneously with *The Reckoning* is *The Long Shadow* (2023), a prestige drama about the hunt for Peter Sutcliffe – the perpetrator of the so-called 'Yorkshire Ripper' sexual murders. This does much to situate the failures of the five-and-a-half-year long police investigation in the context of a believability economy specific to the conjuncture of the depicted period, wherein survivors routinely had their eye-witness statements ignored or belittled due to an absence of believability capital (e.g. if they were poor, if they were not white, if they were seen to be in possession of sexual agency, etc.) It is nonetheless alarmingly easy to draw parallels with the believability economy of the current conjuncture, despite the dramatically altered landscape in which it now sustains itself.

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ii https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12123923/Benefits-cheat-pocketed-29-000-taxpayers-cash-spending-cocaine-caught-Facebook.html

iii Black women face greater risk of death and trauma due to childbirth. This reporter explored why | PBS NewsHour

https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/1wb3q-gAzTmm2XJ2Aw-W1dnXWp6NxA65Ot-1Y78_qVLk/mobilebasic