Business as Usual:

Feminist History in a Post-Truth World

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Abstract:

This chapter explores how feminist historical analyses are at risk in a post-truth framework, with a particular focus on the case study of gender violence. Long imbued with a mythic quality in public memory, the tendency to dismiss feminist knowledge production about gender violence as mere myth has only been exacerbated in the post-truth age. Current modes of history – particularly quantitative and digital approaches – can reinforce feminist interpretations of the past, yet themselves remain open to challenges. Furthermore, how does the politics of believing women relate to gendered approaches to truth and post-truth for historians?

Recent entreaties to acknowledge the extent of gender violence as a socio-historic phenomenon often culminate in a key refrain: "believe women."[1] The #MeToo movement has refocused attention toward the pervasiveness of gender violence, especially after 2017. Its public outpouring of stories seemed to provide undeniable evidence of widespread experiences of sexual violence – except, of course, amongst those who did deny the legitimacy of such testimonies.[2] The need to believe victims and survivors emerges as equally central to the recent miniseries *Unbelievable* (Netflix 2019), which focuses on the true story of a young woman who the police forced to recant the rape she reported. The politics of truth, justice and gender violence have also been at issue in other recent miniseries, from the tales of nineteenth-century Canadian domestic servants in *Alias Grace* (Netflix dir. Mary Harron 2017) to the history of those falsely accused of rape in the "Central Park jogger case" of 1989 in *When They See Us* (Netflix dir. Ava DuVernay 2019).

Our recent edited collection, *Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives* (2019), attests to the realisation that, although gender violence has reached what might be described as "a particularly significant historical moment," disbelief continues to characterise the experiences of survivors and countless cases continue to go unreported.[3] Given the persistence of these historical and contemporary realities, it is notable that few recent analyses of the post-truth phenomenon pay much heed to its consequences for feminism.[4] This is because feminist analyses have, to some extent, always existed in something of a post-truth environment in which evidence often held less power and credibility than personal emotions and systems of belief. Taking gender violence as its major case study, this chapter explores how feminist histories of gender violence have been beset by mythologising approaches before examining what this means in terms of a contemporary feminist politics of truth and belief. The chapter concludes by considering how emerging feminist methodologies may produce new forms of evidence, and how these are likely to fare in a post-truth context.

Gender violence as myth

The ghost of a prostitute comes into a bar, inviting men to spend the night with her. The next morning the men wake up, only to find themselves lying on a gravestone.

– A ghost story with local variants across Zimbabwe

Women's experiences of gender violence have long been simultaneously revealed and denied. This violence haunts histories of the domestic and judicial realms, sometimes literally. Literary theorist Heather Harper argues that during the eighteenth century, when social mores were increasingly rendering domestic violence an 'unspeakable' topic, one genre of writing that continued to depict such violence were ghost stories. Invariably marketed as 'authentic' accounts, these tales depicted slain female apparitions returned to earth to seek vengeance on their male abusers.[5] Today, ghost stories rooted in historical episodes of gender violence continue to be used to discuss such topics worldwide, both in countries where the impact of gender violence is increasingly acknowledged and others where it still carries an air of taboo.[6]

The realisation that ghost stories have traditionally functioned as one of the few forms of public history to deal with gender violence offers a metaphor for the challenges confronting feminist historians in the post-truth context: struggling to make the invisible visible against an engrained politics of belief – or disbelief – and constant attempts to reduce the topic to the status of mere myth. Described as a story or a system of belief that operates at both the unconscious and conscious level, myth functions as a narrative through which individuals and communities make sense of the world. In much contemporary parlance myth holds the connotation of falsity, yet certain cultural ideals and norms transcend this framework and achieve the status of truth.[7] Since "communicative acts" such as storytelling have been used to narrate the past for much of human history, myths are often close cousins to histories.[8] However, whereas history is the past as understood from surviving sources, myths are collective understandings of the past and present that has evolved from shared wisdom – things people *believe* and *feel* to be true.

Post-truth has been described as 'a circumstance in which objective facts and the correspondence between reality and what is said about reality is less influential in shaping public opinion than emotions or personal beliefs'.[9] In other words, it describes a world in which myths – stories that resonate with the society producing them – are more important than the facts or histories that lie behind them. Philosopher Lee McIntyre suggests that one of the defining characteristics of a post-truth worldview is that it subordinates and obfuscates facts to feelings so as to challenge truth itself, thereby asserting political dominance.[10] The extent to which this is a purely contemporary phenomenon can and has been questioned. "Capitalism, racism, consumerism, and patriarchy feed off each other and are mobilised largely through a notion of commonsense," Henry A. Giroux and Debaditya Bhattacharya argue; such ideologies may be increasingly contested, yet there is little to indicate that they are losing "power as a pedagogical force."[11]

Similarly, 'fake news' existed long before the rise of social media or twenty-first-century demagoguery. When it comes to political history, fake news and its ilk have affected figures from Mark Anthony to George Washington.[12] But media campaigns of disinformation also have a long lineage amongst opponents to feminist causes. Such tactics beset one of the most infamous rape cases in Australian history – the 'Mount Rennie outrage' of 1886 – in which twelve men were prosecuted and four were hanged for the brutal gang rape of a 16-year-old girl. The circumstances of the crime and the considerable evidence against many of those prosecuted (including eye-witness testimony) meant some newspapers supported the conviction and sentence. Others, however, like the *Bulletin*, were scandalised that men's lives should be placed into jeopardy on the evidence of a girl that they – without foundation – depicted as a prostitute and daughter of criminals.[13]

Whether referred to as myths or fake news, such victim-blaming has been and remains a standard operating response to incidents of gender violence. Historically, the legal establishment has been highly suspicious of women's propensity for truth-telling. This was especially so with respect to women's accounts of sexual violence, as judges habitually felt more willing to give men the benefit of the doubt than to imprison them unjustly. This is in part because the law itself is not concerned with 'truth' but rather 'legal truth'; that is, whether a proposition is valid or can be proven at law.[14] While assumptions about women's capacity to offer truthful accounts remained largely unchallenged for many centuries, feminist analyses in recent decades have helped reorient – or at least challenge – many of these assumptions in the public sphere. And yet, one longitudinal study finds little difference in rape complainants' courtroom experiences between the 1950s and the twenty-first century; cross-examining lawyers continue to rely on rape myths and attempt to discredit a complainant's plausibility, credibility, and reliability in order to instill reasonable doubt in the jury.[15] Indeed, feminist historians argue that changing cultural and sexual mores have the potential to "reinforce stereotypes of female duplicity and deny women standing as believable victims of rape."[16]

All sorts of myths have been and continue to be used to justify gender violence. Women, these myths suggest, can prevent sexual violence by dressing conservatively or avoiding certain areas. Husbands cannot rape their own wives. Domestic violence victims can simply leave their abusers. Such ideas started to be challenged as far back as 1974, when criminologists Julia and Herman Schwendinger first documented a range of myths about rape that operated in legal and social settings. This included the idea that men were actuated by "uncontrollable passions", that victims were "asking for it", and that women could prevent a rape if they really wanted to.[17] Over three decades later, a 2009 study similarly identified 28 information myths that acted as powerful barriers to survivors of intimate partner violence accessing support services. This included the assumption that domestic violence only affects people from particular socioeconomic backgrounds, that abuse only 'counts' if it leaves physical marks, and that victims can be to blame for provoking the abuse.[18] While these myths have undergone challenge in recent decades, countering such claims continues to be a central function of much feminist activism and scholarship.

Looking into the past, the myths that underpin gender violence today are joined by a host of others. In sixteenth-century Europe, it was believed that moles on women's genitals were signs of witchcraft that justified hanging or burning.[19] In nineteenth-century Ireland, some community members saw no problem in a husband beating and burning the fairy 'changeling' who had assumed the form of his wife.[20] In twentieth-century South Africa, accusations of women practicing magic were sometimes seen as reasonable grounds for family violence.[21] Examining such histories from a twenty-first century perspective merely reveals how far-reaching and farcical the patriarchal mythologising of gender violence has been. Mythological belief systems themselves have, historically, often simultaneously depicted gender violence while denying its significance, from the biblical story of David and Bathsheba's normalisation of coercive sexual violence, to the ravaging of the Sabine women in classical Roman mythology glorifying mass rape in the name of wartime nation-building.

It was only during the 1970s that feminists began to recover women's history, a process which was far from uncontested.[22] Indeed, when pioneer historian Gerda Lerner challenged historians to recognise and reconsider the "androcentric assumptions" that defined historical analysis prior to the 1970s, her call represented a radical departure from previous scholarship.[23] Women's history, in contradistinction from the subdiscipline of gender history, which emerged across the 1980s and 1990s, insisted that women's lives and historical contributions have been overlooked and are worthy of recovery. What may make the feminist analysis of women's history seem anti-factual to some onlookers is that its findings are grounded in such a reinterpretation of facts and received wisdom that its findings routinely result in a fundamental challenge to one's worldview. Developed across the 1980s, feminist standpoint theory became directly concerned with the nature of feminist truth claims. According to Susan Hekman, it "raises a central and unavoidable question for feminist theory: How do we justify the truth of the feminist claim that women have been and are oppressed?"[24] To the degree that feminist historical analysis is rooted in a tradition in which the personal is also seen as political, it has long been concerned with those private realms not only often dismissed as less important than the public stages on which 'real' histories focus, but less readily amenable to empirical analysis.

Each methodological approach has contributed to constructing the history of gender violence in all its variance. Without the development of feminist and anti-racist methodological frameworks, the historical experiences of the enslaved African American women who became the subjects of nonconsensual gynecological medical experimentation during the nineteenth century would remain unknown.[25] So too would the nature and extent of Jewish women's experiences of sexual violence during the Holocaust.[26] Feminist scholarship continues to acknowledge the pivotal influence of feminist activism, as it took decades to bring the enforced military prostitution and sexual slavery that the Japanese military perpetrated during the Asia-Pacific War to light.[27] It is therefore pertinent to ask: Is a feminist worldview – and thus feminist historical analysis – inherently at risk in the post-truth era? Or, for feminist historians, is a 'post-truth' world perhaps just business as usual?

Politics of truth in feminist history

If you encounter Bella Sheephead, a shepherdess from Buttermere whose love hailed from a town nearby, her ghost will take your head. The couple married, but her love already has another wife; his punishment was light but Bella's was death. Blameless in life and beheaded unjustly, her body was thrown into the lake. In a state of undeath she can neither rest nor find her head, and so takes the head of a sheep. Forever seeking her own head, she will exact revenge upon all who wronged her. She can still be summoned by touching certain rocks, or pillars, or by uttering her name.

– A ghost story with variants across West Cumbria, England

A sense of incredulity towards feminist scholarship is far from new, given that feminist analyses have long been subject to considerable skepticism. Establishing how the politics of truth operate within feminist historical analysis has been an ongoing concern given the sexism and racism that have long underpinned the status quo. These were the assumptions with which scholars faced as a feminist worldview gradually emerged to gain scholarly influence. That said, feminist historians are not in a position to believe the assertions of historical actors, either women or men, unreservedly. This is because individuals have long been motivated to morph the truth for political purposes by factors such as racism and sexism in a manner that is not dissimilar to that which defines post-truth politics. What is most important is to understand why this occurred, both at the individual and collective level. The theory of intersectionality offers both an important corrective and implicit challenge, as it foregrounds the need for analysis which is grounded in the connections between gender, race, class, and myriad other factors.

As much as myths about women's capacity for truth-telling have been used to justify gender violence, equally pernicious ideas about rapists have also gained the status of myth. Indeed, feminist historians describe white women's complicity in constructing what Angela Y. Davis describes as the "myth of the black rapist."[28] This derived from the "myth of the Dark Continent," in which the nineteenth-century imperialist venture positioned itself to gradually replace African customs – in which accounts of unfamiliar cultural and sexual mores played no small part – with European notions of civilisation.[29] Racialised ideas about black men's propensity to violate white women began to develop during the colonial era across Africa and beyond. This myth assumed appellations such as the "black peril" or "*swart gevaar*" across southern Africa and the "negro beast" in the United States, its meaning crystallising across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[30]

Highly mutable, each of these myths had the capacity to morph and transform so as to suit alternative historical, national, and geographical contexts. Other settler colonies generated different but no less pernicious myths. In Australia, for example, Aboriginal men were vilified for their treatment of Aboriginal women, acts which colonists interpreted as including rape, prostitution, and violent bride capture or exchange. Yet Aboriginal men were otherwise emasculated and desexualised in colonial imaginings so as to legitimise what Patrick Brantilnger describes as "extinction discourse," another myth which simultaneously anticipated and justified the gradual disappearance of Indigenous peoples.[31] Both ultimately served to condone and legitimate the actions of white stockmen during the late nineteenth century, who routinely abducted Aboriginal women and girls and exploited their sexual, economic, and reproductive labour on the frontier.[32]

Historian Estelle B. Freedman describes how the myth of the black rapist took on ever greater significance in the United States following the abolition of slavery in 1865. Hereafter, white supremacists increasingly justified the lynching of black men in order to protect white women's sexual purity. The result was to pathologise black men while routinely overlooking white men's sexual crimes against women – most especially women of colour. However, white women's testimony became equally central to the construction and perpetuation of racism. The veracity of women's claims was at question during the decade-long Scottsboro trials in which nine African Americans, between the ages of 13 and 20, were accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. One woman later recanted her testimony and the other equivocated, yet the prosecution of the accused continued nonetheless. While this trial did begin to offer foundations for challenging racist misconceptions about African American men and rape, it certainly confirmed existing ideas about women's propensity to lie about sexual assault.[33]

Thus, it is possible to trace myths about the "black peril" and "negro beast" as providing the seeds for emergent myths about Mexican rapists or "bad hombres" in the United States as much as about Islamic refugee and immigrant rapists in Europe. Yet, as Liz Conor argues, it is equally possible that the denigration of Aboriginal men's sexuality in colonial discourse offered the foundations for contemporary reimaginings, in which relationships between Aboriginal women and white men become romanticised in popular culture as examples of forbidden love.[34] When myths are mobilised for different purposes collide with each other in this way, insofar as certain men experience the weight of one myth and women continue to experience the weight of the other, all parties fail to benefit in a manner that ultimately fail to challenge the status quo.

When it comes to racial justice, then a special type of amnesia is at play when making the claim that the 2010s constitutes a new and particular post-truth era.[35] To consider post-truth or fake news an emergent rather than an existing phenomenon, Derek Ford points out, "is to claim that the domestic and international wars against First Nations, Black people, and people of color that were and are central to US democracy have been based on truthful politics and media."[36] It is therefore imperative to challenge what Ford describes as 'zombie intellectualism', in which academics commentate upon but fail to participate directly in political struggles, functioning under what is itself a myth of academia: that if only the theories, the political analyses, or the histories of intellectuals were understood by the masses, then systems of injustice would simply collapse.[37]

Reframing myths as well as historical accounts is part of the broader shifts in terminology surrounding gender violence. This proved a particular challenge for feminist scholars. Surveys on violence against women conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, were met by an anti-feminist backlash, and accusations that broad definitions of 'abuse' and 'victimization' had served to inflate numbers to further feminist interests.[38] Terminology becomes even more vexed when historians try to recover evidence of gender violence because the language for such behaviours were both different and constantly in flux. For example, before the rise of the term domestic violence in the 1970s, the phrase 'wife-beating' was far more commonplace. Other behaviours that are recognised as gender violence today, such as economic abuse, simply did not exist in the language of the past, even though such behaviours were historically present.[39] The complexities of inculcating a rigorous culture of belief must be contextualised historically in order to achieve justice in cases of gender violence.

The problem of feminist history in a post-truth era

The ghost of a chambermaid is believed to haunt the Criterion Hotel on Quay Street in Rockhampton. What happened to her? And why? Nobody knows…

– A ghost story told in Central Queensland, Australia

The edited collection *Risk and Uncertainty in a Post-Truth Society* (2019) asks: 'can we be more transparent about uncertainty in scientific evidence without undermining public understanding and trust?'[40] The same can be asked of historical evidence. Indeed, a fundamental tenet of historical disciplinary practice is that the contestability of historical evidence means histories can be endlessly produced, debated and revised, but the past itself remains a foreign country that can never be fully known.

Historians set themselves the impossible task of bringing the ghosts of the past to life, while at the same time acknowledging that such attempts will inevitably remain incomplete, ephemeral, and conditional.

In the current climate, even the most empirical forms of evidence can be regarded with scepticism. Ed Humpherson points out that the post-truth climate of distrust of the integrity of evidence and facts likewise undermines public confidence in the usefulness of statistics, even those produced by experts or official bodies. Such skeptism, Humpherson further points out, may not be entirely unwarranted because, in today's data-rich world, it has become easier than ever 'to select and highlight preferred data to suit a particular narrative'.[41] Often, however, it is not statistics themselves that are flawed, but the ways in which they are used. When communicating statistical evidence, David Spiegelhalter notes, there seems to be an 'irresistible tendency to produce a simplifying narrative,' blunting its subtle meanings or exaggerating its significance.[42]

Early feminist scholars concerned themselves with questioning such simplistic narratives. Shulamit Reinharz observes that feminist research has long been symbiotic with qualitative approaches, given that feminist research originated in a 'critical distrust of earlier non-feminist research,' which was often quantitative in approach. To some extent, though, Reinharz suggests that 'the fusion of "qualitative" and "feminist" is more myth than reality'.[43] Many early feminist histories of the family – and family violence – made particular use of quantitative evidence.[44] Nevertheless, a 2011 study that datamined half a million abstracts from two key women's history journals found that such research was overwhelmingly qualitative, calling for the expansions of quantitative approaches.[45] Not limited to history, this so-called feminist antipathy towards quantitative methods has also been identified as an issue in sociological research.[46] Since the late 1990s, beginning with the work of Ann Oakley, there have been efforts to rehabilitate quantitative methods within feminist research.[47] One particular area where calls for greater use of quantitative approaches amongst feminist researchers have emerged is gender violence.[48]

When economic historian Jo Guldi and intellectual historian David Armitage published *The History Manifesto* (2014), available open-access via Cambridge University Press, the book emerged as both a provocation and a 'call to arms' for historians. It proclaimed that the prominent models of historical methodology developed over the last fifty years were fundamentally flawed; one implication was that historians had failed to steer public debate by speaking 'truth to power'. According to the authors, this had occurred as a result of increasing disciplinary subject specialisation and a narrowing of temporal focus that discouraged long-term thinking or real-world engagement. A return to grand narratives and *longue durée* histories that examine changes in large-scale structures and institutions, not across mere decades but across the span of centuries, Guildi and Armitage observed, had begun to take place as a result of the rise of big data and historical digitisation projects.[49]

The History Manifesto attracted much commentary and some praise, but also criticisms. Among the problems found with Guildi and Armitage's thesis was that it failed to acknowledge the value of sub-discipline specialisation in terms of expanding history beyond the realm of politics, international relations, and intellectual life to transformations in individual experience through the lens of gender, race, class, family, sexuality, and emotions.[50] Yet it also illuminates the challenges and opportunities that the current trends towards big data and digitisation might present to feminist analysis. Guildi and Armitage cite digitisation initiatives such as the Old Bailey Online as examples of big data projects with the potential to transform public understandings of how the present was reached via collaborative research on the evolution of law and society. This push towards big data in criminal justice history has only grown more pronounced since 2014, encouraging the production of microhistories that explore the intersections of gender, family and violence.[51]

Digital history is another area where there are growing calls for feminist methodological approaches. Despite having strong voices in some areas, such as digital pedagogy, women as a whole remain under-represented in digital humanities scholarship.[52] The voices of women of colour – from either the Global North or South – are even rarer. This intersectional invisibility extends to source digitisation, with material containing the voices of low-income black women far less likely to be part of big data corpuses than the voices of privileged white men.[53] Calling for greater reflexive feminist practice in digital methods, Koen Leurs notes that there tends to be two simplistic narratives that impede the development of such approaches: 'Scholars celebrate the politics of big data knowledge production for its omnipotent objectivity or dismiss it outright as data fundamentalism that may lead to methodological genocide.' One challenge for feminists, as Leurs sees it, is that "[d]ata-driven research often values aggregated, seemingly 'natural' volunteered data over the complexity of individual human subjectivity and meaning-making."[54]

One of the benefits of big data, however, is that it enables the identification of smaller subsets of data related to women, minorities and individuals or cases who might be considered as statistical outliers, but whose experiences can be analysed at a scale not possible before.[55] Case study approaches are valuable precisely because they offer a window into wider trends, processes or events, while imbuing these with complexities and individual nuances, rather than reducing them to simplistic narratives. The editorial for a 2012 special issue of the *Journal of Women's History* dedicated to life histories noted that each was deliberately chosen to offer a window into larger issues of the societies in which the women moved.[56] All of this is to suggest that, while feminist historical analysis may be inherently at risk in a post-truth framework, it is still an area of strength and growth, in which traditional feminist approaches are being successfully blended with contemporary quantitative and digital methods.

The politics of believing women maintains a complicated relationship with gendered approaches to truth and post-truth. Indeed, gender alone cannot be the only factor through which to understand gender violence. Yet, these perspectives can be productively paired with statistical approaches to feminist history in order to directly seek to counteract post-truth claims. New statistical approaches are certainly emerging with the specific aim of combatting fake news; for example, a benchmark dataset has been made publicly available to facilitate fake news detection.[57] Such a tool, however, is not positioned to counter the sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia that already characterises so much news reportage and interpretation.

Ghost stories operated historically as a dominant genre through which gender violence could find cultural expression, becoming myths that would transform through each retelling yet nonetheless conveying what were believed to be truths about the nature and extent of gender violence. The Zimbabwean oral tradition illuminates how gender violence remains both revealed and denied, Bella Sheephead of West Cumbria conjures a sense of violent rage in response to gendered injustice, and the haunting of the Criterion Hotel evokes the degree to which these experiences remain obscured. Each oral tradition asserts that violated women should be believed. But if ghost stories already operate in the realm of post-truth, historians can consider the truths about gender violence that these oral traditions do reveal without needing to resort to such mythic, ghostly hauntings. Feminist historical analysis is already poised to embrace these insights and pair it with rigorous statistical analysis and the possibilities of big data to combat the skepticism of the post-truth era.

Our thanks to Tawanda V. Chambwe, Lotti Nkomo, Duncan Money, Janet Stevenson, and Noreen Rossall for sharing their recollections of ghostly oral traditions.

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