

# Feminist takes on post-truth

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## Abstract

This volume argues that feminist theory can provide distinctive and potent resources to confront and take on post-truth. By ‘post-truth’, we refer to a variety of discourses and practices that subvert the sense that we share a common world. Because post-truth undermines the norms and conditions that make possible shared political practices and institutions, post-truth politics is fundamentally anti-democratic. The most common response to post-truth has, however, come from those who call for reinstating truth and rationality, with special emphasis on returning to the facts and fact-checking. From a feminist perspective, this approach is worrisome as it risks idealizing the connection between democracy and truth, disowning the tensions within and between them, and suppressing contestation *tout court*. Diagnosing the post-truth moment we face two challenges: on the one hand, there is too much contestation (of the post-truth variety); on the other hand, there is too much depoliticization (of the technocratic or rationalist variety). This binary effectively limits the space within which critiques of post-truth can meaningfully intervene. Feminist takes on post-truth must take seriously this dual challenge at the crossroads of depoliticization and hyper-politicization, acknowledging the anti-democratic dangers of post-truth while keeping open the possibility and necessity of contestation. Our gambit is that effective rejoinders to post-truth can be found in practices that affirm rather than repudiate a plural world. Rather than simply condemning or dismissing post-truth as mad or irrational, the feminist theorists in this volume move closer to what we’re up against in order to see how encounters with reality provide opportunities to radicalize and politicize our relation to it in ways that do not undermine the conditions for others to do the same. This volume is an attempt to open new, and emphasize existing, feminist modes of response that might break the deadlock in the post-truth discourse.

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'Post-truth' politics poses a specific problem for feminists committed to democracy. Yet it remains undertheorized from feminist points of view.<sup>1</sup> This volume is inspired by the idea that feminist theory can provide distinctive and potent resources to confront and take on post-truth. By 'post-truth', we refer to a variety of discourses and practices that undermine the sense that we share a common world and thereby subvert the possibilities for democracy. Whether through overt lying, deliberate or dispersed disorientation, or 'flooding the senses,' post-truth destabilizes and interferes with practices of trust and solidarity, fragmenting public reality – it is what Bonnie Honig calls a form of 'shock politics' (Honig 2021).<sup>2</sup> At the level of practice, post-truth turns claims about value and policy into 'just another opinion', shredding the appeal to shared norms of truth. At the institutional level, it threatens to no longer recognize or effectively take down established democratic institutions (however imperfect they might be), while replacing them with populist or authoritarian leadership. In undermining the norms and conditions that make possible shared political practices and institutions, post-truth politics is fundamentally anti-democratic.

**Democracy, destabilization and depoliticization**

Of course, destabilization can also take democratic forms, and indeed is often an indispensable strategy for feminist activism. Challenging the given order and its reproduction of historical inequalities while aiming to reconfigure it will sometimes require forms of contestation that do not fit within and even upset accepted norms and practices. Feminists and others who have been (and continue to be) disregarded as irrational, emotional, irrelevant, or outrageous have, in their quests for equality and emancipation, necessarily confronted the conflicting pressures to support democratic norms while challenging their own exclusion from them. Among its many dangerous effects, then, post-truth politics is especially threatening in its appropriation of the language of democracy and political exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Unlike emancipatory contestation, the particular form of disorientation produced by post-truth aims less at democracy's reconfiguration than at its decomposition and unspooling.

The extreme right is able to simultaneously appropriate emancipatory and democratic ideals as its own while working (often successfully) to undermine democracy and the institutions that undergird it. The discursive promulgation of appeals to 'the people' (invoking the language of democracy, emancipation, liberation, and freedom) aims to conceal the populist and/or authoritarian tendencies that motivate it. Of course, when post-truth actors (among politicians, the media, and the citizenry more generally) lay claim to speak for 'the people,' they do indeed appeal to many people. We cannot discount this very real base of support or deny its claims to participate in the democratic arena.

What we take issue with is its exclusionary force and sentiment. The rhetoric of freedom is deployed to block the freedoms of more vulnerable or non-dominant groups, reserving it for those who are historically most privileged, even as they usurp the language of oppression. In practicing subjugation under the guise of liberty and emancipation, post-truth is a kind of ‘ugly freedom’, as Elizabeth Anker (2022) phrases it in her recent book.

The most common response to the disorientation and desensitization of post-truth’s shock politics has, however, come from those who call for reinstating truth and rationality, with special emphasis on returning to the facts and fact-checking.<sup>4</sup> From a feminist perspective, this approach is worrisome as it risks idealizing the connection between democracy and truth, disowning the tensions within and between them, and suppressing contestation *tout court*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, post-truth critique too often emerges from a liberal, managerial, technocratic or hyper-rationalist perspective that not only denounces post-truth but also kicks out the affective and emotional with it. Under the guise of reason or facts, it is easy to hold purported irrationality responsible for our current political and epistemic crises. This kind of epistocracy, however, represents another fundamentally anti-democratic move insofar as it makes acquiescence to a particular knowledge regime a condition of ‘good citizenship’.<sup>6</sup> From feminist and radical democratic perspectives, we might hope instead that democratic promise lies precisely in the possibility of challenging existing orders and enacting alternative ones (even ones that might be deemed scandalous or unintelligible within current norms).

Diagnosing the post-truth moment, then, we face two challenges: on the one hand, there is too much contestation (of the post-truth variety, which loses touch with the shared reality out of which it emerged); on the other hand, there is too much depoliticization (of the technocratic or rationalist variety, which pins its aspirations on epistemic idealization). This binary appears to effectively limit the space within which critiques of post-truth can meaningfully intervene. Our diagnosis of post-truth hence understands it as simultaneously a problem of too much and not enough politicization.

## **Feminist realism and democratic openness**

Feminist takes on post-truth must take seriously this dual challenge at the crossroads of depoliticization and hyper-politicization, acknowledging the anti-democratic dangers of post-truth while keeping open the possibility and necessity of contestation. If post-truth politics weaponizes feelings of being left behind or feeling like ‘strangers in your own land’ (Hochschild 2016), feminist theory and practice offers ways to address these feelings in ways that do not curtail plurality and shared reality, but instead affirms them in their contestatory nature. Feminist theorists have worked to understand the devaluation of affect, to speak from non-dominant experience, and to attend to both specificity and plurality. Given that feminist theory has wrestled with the apparent opposition (and sexualization) of public and private, reason and emotion, normal and abnormal, we believe that it offers formidable resources for understanding post-truth by taking an approach rooted in non-ideal theory. These feminist resources, in conjunction with those of psychoanalysis, critical phenomenology, and non-foundational conceptions of truth, can provide new insights into both the post-truth situation and possibilities for its

transformation. Taking reality, materiality, plurality, and affect seriously, feminist theorists can take on post-truth in ways that access its motivating forces, its variable identitarian frameworks, its animating purposes, its operative commitments and its rootedness in forms of life that many want to preserve against apparent dissolution.<sup>7</sup>

More specifically, we propose that the realism inherent to feminist theory offers unique avenues for reflection on the meaning and impact of post-truth's anti-democratic politics, and offers new insights into possibilities for reclamation or renewal of a shared world. By 'feminist realism', we refer to the idea that feminism begins with a confrontation with reality as it is actually lived and experienced. Political realism more generally posits that the relation between theory and practice cannot be one of simply imposing an abstract, universal, or idealized rationality or moral norm on a messy and contingent political reality (Sleat 2018). In contrast to ideal or normative theory (which is certainly also an important component of feminist work), feminist realism begins on the ground with engaged criticism and diagnosis of our present condition, including the illusions promulgated therein (Frazer 2018).<sup>8</sup> Responses to post-truth will be inadequate, and even self-undermining, if they merely appeal to abstract moral or epistemic norms or offer free-standing normative prescriptions. A diagnostic approach instead means starting with the world as it is, and not as we would want it to be, and laying the groundwork for critique within reality as we find it. Indeed our suspicion, supported by many of the essays included here which resist the paired temptations of moralism and rationalism, is that idealizing and fixing norms of truth will only serve to accelerate the post-truth condition. This means taking account of actual political realities in their complicated plurality (including the emotional experience of post-truthers, as well as the cultural archive of patriarchy and whiteness informing them).<sup>9</sup>

It might seem odd or oxymoronic to return to political realism at a time when reality itself is in question: can there be realism about the loss of a shared reality? Our wager is that by grappling with the inner confusions and fractures of reality, its lack of seamlessness, we will have the best chance to understand the collective processes that further its fragmentation, as well as (possibly) to do the work necessary to repair our shared relation to it. Contrary to post-truth, and to the technocratic response to post-truth, the feminist realism we propose does not gloss over contradictions but is sustained by agonistic contestation.<sup>10</sup>

Without disowning the deliberative element of democratic theory and practice, we see agonism and contestation as intrinsic to democratic politics. The problem of reality is inescapably also a problem of contestation. For agonistic thinkers, reality is indeed affirmed through its contestation and looking at it from a plurality of perspectives. As Hannah Arendt writes, the 'reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised' (1958, 50). Of course it is this very contestability that can be politically exploited. Any introduction of a norm distinguishing between practices (good or bad, progressive or regressive, etc.) is politically contestable (Laclau 1996; Mouffe 2000). But does this mean that we are locked within a space evacuated of norms, distinctions, and limits? By highlighting the reality that reality is itself contested, and indeed intrinsically contestable, post-truth illuminates a

fundamental and paradoxical feature of democracy itself.<sup>11</sup> Indeed post-truth plays on, utilizes, and hyperbolizes democracy's contestatory medium, even as it de-materializes the public space of appearances by appealing to images and ideas unmoored from lived experience.<sup>12</sup> When what sounds true is more plausible, coherent, or desirable than what is true, we are already on the way to fissuring a common world.<sup>13</sup> This insight about the contestable nature of truth points to the impasses of living within a non-utopian, disharmonious form of politics – democracy – that is fundamentally paradoxical.

Building upon feminist democratic theorists like Chantal Mouffe and Bonnie Honig, we understand democracy's paradoxical nature not as something to be curtailed, but as a productive tension (Honig 2007, 2). How do we understand this paradox at the heart of democratic contestation? It can in part be captured with reference to Foucault's reconceptualization of Ancient *parrhēsia*. Foucault describes a crisis intrinsic to democracy rooted in the paradoxical relationship between true discourse and the equal distribution of power (Foucault 2010, 184). Honig traces it back to Rousseau and to the contingency at the founding of democracy – what comes first, the constitution or the people? – that cannot be escaped as every form of boundary drawing is itself continuously provisional and open to challenge. Or, as Mouffe understands it, the paradox points to an irresolvable tension between the demands and logics of equality and liberty, and a concomitant need to limit popular sovereignty without being able to say how to do so (Mouffe 2000, 4–5). The tension between, on the one hand, a stable established order that endures over time and provides the space for political action and, on the other hand, ongoing contestation that could go so far as spinning that stability off its axis is another form that the democratic paradox takes. Rather than trying to resolve this productive paradox, we understand it, and its 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe 2000) as what keeps democracy going.

On our assessment, both post-truth and rationalist responses to post-truth aim to close down the paradox of democracy. Rationalist responses curtail contestation by transforming the question of post-truth into a simple conflict between the stupidity of reactionary populism on one hand, and the logical responses of what Fraser calls 'progressive neoliberalism' on the other (Fraser 2022; 2016). Meanwhile, post-truth politics employs efforts to 'settle' the question of the people and its desires in favour of familialized logics of homogeneity (Brown 2018), while simultaneously sowing doubt about existing democratic institutions and procedures even as it uses them to erode democracy. While Mouffe and Foucault envision paradox as intrinsic to the nature of democracy and thus potentially self-sustaining, it is always precarious, vulnerable to the pushing or pulling from opposing directions that would like to undermine it once and for all. Rationalist and technocratic responses risk bringing democratic dynamics to a halt; post-truth makes those dynamics run wild, parasitically exploiting democratic fragility while aiming to replace it with a mix of nihilism and authority.

In the face of these threats, it seems that the best we can do is to stay true to the openness and contestability of democracy's paradox, while also relying on the shape and solidity of established institutions that provide stability through time. As political realists and feminists, we do not think we can (or should) provide a single common criterion to settle contestation once and for all. As feminist and democratic theorists, we affirm the need for a shared reality, while also acknowledging the necessity in democratic politics for

ongoing agonistic challenge to the regime of the given, in order to build a genuinely common world. As should be clear, we take the tension between the need for sharing a world and contesting pre-given forms of life to be foundational to democratic politics. We do not seek to overcome this tension; indeed, overcoming or finally stabilizing it would undermine democracy. We may wish for a singular or substantive criterion to distinguish contestatory practices from post-truth practices, but we must recognize that such a criterion is itself a phantasm, forever out of reach. Such is the troubling but unavoidable (and, one might say, realist) ambiguity intrinsic to democracy.

Our gambit is that effective rejoinders to post-truth can be found in practices that affirm rather than repudiate a plural world. By embracing the rich, textured, contingent, and unexpected sense of reality, we can stay on the side of the fragile and the democratic. Of course, what counts as real or world-affirming is by no means self-evident. We recognize that this might be unsatisfactory as it does not absolutely rule out the possibility of contestation running out of bounds. The current rising tide of anti-democratic politics, in which post-truth plays a central part, seems to call for a unified and unambiguous critique – yet our approach rules out depoliticized moral purity or the assertion of unattainable principles. Nonetheless, we believe that taking this risk is preferable to falling back to a rigidly rational and inevitably exclusionary conception of democracy. By focusing on collective practices that are public, plural, and touch the ground, we hope that this volume helps to materialize and solidify conditions for and practices of agonistic democracy without taking for granted a specific distribution of the sensible.<sup>14</sup>

### **Between optimism, coping, and despair**

This volume took shape in the midst of numerous post-truth crises. We started working on this special issue in February 2020. In Europe and in the United States, Covid was in the news as something happening elsewhere. The US presidential election was on the horizon. In the months and years in which we developed this volume further, political crises accelerated: the ‘big lie’ of the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection; vaccine conspiracy theories; mass anti-government protests in western Europe; climate denial and the ever-larger threat of climate change; the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the Taliban government banning women’s education; the Russian invasion of Ukraine (under the auspices of a ‘special military operation’ aiming for ‘deNazification’); the overturning of the right to abortion in the United States; the election of a neo-fascist party as the leading party in Italy; the brutal government response to mass feminist protest in Iran – this demoralizing list could go on. It seems impossible to continue ‘as normal’. Perhaps it is not surprising in this light that around the world, and close to home, organized and disorganized lying have become normalized, accompanied by frayed public trust among citizens in one another, in the news media, and in government, producing an aura of overarching distrust that is seemingly metastasizing. In the midst of these unfolding historical events, working from home in the Netherlands and the US, our conversations moved between optimism, coping, and despair.

Indeed, the current political moment makes it unclear if, in the relay between contestation and shared reality, the basic form of democracy will be upheld.<sup>15</sup> In political

theory, the optimism that came with the ‘movements of the squares’ in the early 2010s – for example, Occupy, the Arab Spring – has now given way to intermittent phases of despair and an attitude that falls back to saving what we can or imagining other worlds (Anker and Felski 2017; Thomas and brown 2015; Tsing et al. 2017). The basic rights of women, girls, trans and queer folk that seemed to be on the rise until not too long ago, are now actively threatened by the rise of right-wing ultra-conservatism employing post-truth strategies. Any naive myth of ‘progress’ has been set aside. And yet, from a feminist and democratic perspective, defeatism is not an option: as the Iranian schoolgirls raising their middle fingers to their country leaders - ‘whose courage sets your very guts on fire’ - know all too well (Eltahawy 2022). In such circumstances, what would a pragmatic contestation, one that takes seriously the reality of collapsing realities, look like?

The essays that appear in this Special Issue are ordered in an arc (but not, we insist, a progression) that moves from the tragic to the comedic. Each proposes different analyses, judgements, and strategies for dealing with the theoretical and political challenges of post-truth.<sup>16</sup> Is there an opportunity for reparation or restoration of a shared world? Or must we find ways to cope with irreparable fractures? The issue’s overall purpose is to highlight a diagnosis of the present while (perhaps?) offering avenues for redress. Fundamentally at stake is the question: what are the grounds or resources, if any, for hope (for democracy and for truth)? Put more optimistically, on what grounds can we engage with and effectively respond to the challenges of post-truth in both theory and practice?

Rather than simply condemning or dismissing post-truth as mad or irrational, the feminist theorists in this volume move closer to the situation at hand, closer to what we’re up against (Ahmed 2017), in order to see how encounters with reality provide opportunities to radicalize and politicize our relation to it in ways that do not undermine the conditions for others to do the same. While taking different approaches and relying on different concepts, the essays included here address the post-truth problematic by reflecting on affect, theatricality, particularity, courage, the refusal of reality, and a shared sense of normality. They focus on conditions of emergence and think about conditions for redress of post-truth politics. We see three predominant theoretical threads woven throughout the perspectives included here: first, an exploration of how we attain (and lose) a shared sense of normality (Marder, Wehrle, Yazıcıoğlu, Harris), borrowing from diverse philosophical currents including Foucault, Arendt, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis; second, a turn to affect in its experienced and performative complexity and as a potentially restorative, and not only disruptive force (Harris, Woodford, McAuliffe, Honig, Rotem); and third, a turn to particular worldly things and practices, in particular the practice of contestation (Rotem, Gebhardt, Honig).

Elissa Marder’s essay takes on the profound and existential stakes of climate change and climate denial, and the way both threaten the ongoing existence of reality itself, as well as our human relation and orientation to it. Approaching climate denial from a psychoanalytic perspective, Marder argues that ‘the psyche relies on illusions and denials to survive its encounters with the world’ and that climate denial cannot be quarantined from a more rationalist response which is in fact another variation of it. Moreover, while climate denial might be reactive and aggressive, this is in large part because climate change is ‘radically unthinkable’, unbearable, and irreparable, operating according to a

‘traumatic temporality’ that the psyche cannot come to grips with. Marder considers replacing the phrase ‘climate change’ with the word ‘ecocide’, drawn to its connotations of a primordial crime and its insinuation of bringing ‘egocide’ along with it. But ultimately the connection between eco and ego deters her (it retains too much of the ego’s stability and agency) and she thus prefers ‘climate change’ (with its amorphousness, instability, and even redundancy given that ‘climate *is* change’). Marder’s essay concludes with reflections on our collective fascination with Greta Thunberg who has come to represent a reassuring fantasy of ‘individual sovereignty’ that fails to account for the way that it is already ‘too late’. When we idolize Greta Thunberg, we deny our own helplessness in the face of what we have done to the earth.

Like Marder, who relates post-truth to a much more general sense of not being able to cope with the existential threat of climate change, Maren Wehrle starts her analysis of post-truth experiences from a widely shared longing for normality. Situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that interrupted and perhaps reshaped our understanding of what is ‘normal’, she takes a phenomenological approach to argue that normality is ‘a necessary criterion for every possible experience’. Only in light of our plans and expectations, and in relation to people around us can we make sense of our sometimes frictional experiences of the world. Of course, not everyone has a similarly frictional or smooth experience of the world: Wehrle adds to her phenomenological approach a genealogical analysis of *represented normality* to show that societal norms ease the experiences of dominant societal groups, while blocking those of marginalized communities. Faced with frictions in our experience of the normal, Wehrle highlights two disparate strategies: the post-truth strategy of Covid deniers who try to retain their old sense of normality – struggling ‘*against* a changing and contingent reality’ and the struggle of marginalized groups *for* a reality that includes ever more experiences and perspectives.

Sanem Yazıcıoğlu’s contribution appears in line with what Wehrle calls the struggle for normality, as she positions plurality as a necessary condition for the reality of the world and for political action. Yet plurality is not sufficient; for an inclusive ‘politics of the invisible’ we need a reflexive awareness of political appearance in an Arendtian sense: ‘an active form of visibility that exceeds the bodily senses of presence and witnessing, emphasizing our capacity to interrupt and change the course of the reality that we are seeing’. Yazıcıoğlu connects post-truth to a lack of this reflexive awareness that leads to systemic invisibility where people just do what they are told and forego their relationality with plural others. Her own politics of the invisible demands that we appear as *somebody* among others, in our complete physical and phenomenological bodily sense. But this possibility is not equally granted to everyone. To interrupt post-truth’s conditions of possibility, we should strive to limit those conditions that reduce people to invisible ‘nobodies’ and instead nurture appearing relationally and plurally among others.

Although she does not consider them to be feminist thinkers, Mareike Gebhardt aims to recuperate the work of Arendt and Foucault for a feminist arsenal hidden within inherited archives of knowledge that are also ‘regimes of untruth’. In particular she develops and links the Foucauldian concept of *parrhēsia* with an Arendtian account of courageous truth-telling, noting ‘the ambivalent and messy relation between truth-telling and



normalized “truth”. Taking the Black American poet Amanda Gorman as an exemplar of speaking truth to power, Gebhardt argues that the courage of truth can and must be constituted from marginalized and excluded social positions. By looking at a series of gendered binaries, including those of public and private, philosophy and politics, factual truth and opinion, and factual truth and common sense, Gebhardt reclaims *parrhēsia* as a counter-archival practice that can challenge systems of privilege and give hope to those who have been unseen or unheard.

Erica Harris launches her essay by noting that anti-post-truth has been structured around a ‘dichotomy between emotion and reason’ that situates post-truth as primarily an epistemic problem. Comparing this denial of affect to the way that women’s experiences of oppression have often been dismissed, Harris sees a patriarchal bias embedded in this epistemic judgement. She argues that the feminist critique of the refusal of affect can also be applied to the proposed divorce between reason and affect that is too often proffered by those who seek to diagnose and cure post-truth. Instead of an epistemic approach, Harris proposes that we ‘should let post-truth show up as an affective lived experience’ in an ‘intentional and generative relationship to the world’. Viewing the post-truth attitude as akin to a paranoid symptom in the Freudian sense (i.e. an attempt at recovery), Harris investigates the ‘affective bodily experience’ that underlines post-factuality. She turns to Merleau-Ponty and Sara Ahmed in order to provide a phenomenology of post-factual affect, bringing to the fore the sensations that are the condition of possibility for post-truth.

Noga Rotem’s contribution zones in on the theoretical and political potential of a specific affective mode: female paranoia. Although it might seem troubling to reclaim paranoia in a time of post-truth, Rotem builds upon Schor, Beauvoir and Arendt to explore the conditions under which paranoia can be world-affirming, instead of fending off the world. Rotem shows that the housewife’s attention to detail (as described by Beauvoir) can be politicized by linking her small personal fight with the dust entering her house to large-scale political matters. Yet, this embodied routine of paranoia only leads to resignation and withdrawal – like, as Rotem observes, it does for another woman described by Beauvoir, the narcissist, who is only interested in the world insofar as it reflects her self-image. To gain access to the critical, worlding potential of paranoia, Rotem introduces Arendt’s analysis of Rahel Varnhagen’s transformation ‘from an assimilation-seeking parvenu to a “conscious pariah”’. Impacted by Prussia’s defeat by Napoleon in 1806, Varnhagen’s Berlin salon loses almost all of its visitors but she responds to this material evidence not with resignation but with a ‘hunger for the world’. If we wish to repair the world in the wake of post-truth paranoia, Rotem suggests, we should look at the way material details connect inner worlds with political indictments.

Without falling back to the troubling dichotomy between reason and emotion, Clare Woodford diagnoses post-truth as an intensified flow of affect drawing on aggressive misogyny. Using the work of Judith Butler and Honig, she suggests that a feminist response might collectively disrupt and refuse this flow of affective intensity. Woodford focuses our attention on the aggression of post-truth discourses, suggesting that perhaps there are not ‘more lies in public discourse than before, but that they are defended by increasing levels of aggression’. Instead of dismissing post-truth discourses – as many commentators are prone to do while problematically coupling democracy with truth and

reason – Woodford proposes to defuse this aggression through performative strategies of parody that ‘split the truth, revealing the multiplicity of truths at work in any site’. The most effective strategy of rupture is a collective one, and here Woodford engages with Honig’s recent *Feminist Theory of Refusal*, taking up her strategies of non-work and refusal but criticizing her openness to violence. Woodford’s feminist response to post-truth looks for strategies (including performativity and irony) that can turn aggressive emotions into ones that are more open to plurality and pave the way for different distributions of the sensible.

Jana McAuliffe turns to feminist humour in order to consider resources that might counter the affective weight of being responsible for ‘carrying too much truth’. Humour, she argues, can provide sustenance and grounding for feminist commitments to collective action and resistance to oppression, attenuating the difficulty of living out those commitments by providing energizing reorientation. In particular, McAuliffe analyzes the work of comedian Sarah Cooper and shows that the ‘parodic political critique’ of her lip sync videos models a strategically useful affective stance. Bringing catharsis and critique together, Cooper’s comedy not only provides the release or respite of laughter, but also ‘interrupts the potentially anesthetizing impact of post-truth political speech’. By embodying Trump’s affect (with its combination of over-confidence and imprecision), Cooper’s comedy disrupts his credibility without relying on fact-checking or offering counter-arguments. Ultimately, McAuliffe argues, feminist humour ‘can be a vital part of a feminist survival kit’, helping to navigate the complex complicities, identifications, and temptations to disengagement that might otherwise lead to retreat or inaction.

Bonnie Honig’s essay addresses the obsequious comparison of Ivanka Trump with the biblical Esther, arguing that ‘the ideal of an Estherian Truth Queen’ remains oblivious to authoritarianism and committed to courtier politics. Honig proposes that truth queens (in the plural), unlike the singular Truth Queen, are able to mock rather than get in bed with power, thereby showing ‘care for the world’. As does McAuliffe, Honig turns to the comic for a ‘repertoire of techniques that reject domination’. She explores the way that the ‘gallows humor’ of ‘comic truth queens’ can provide effective avenues for political critique. Starting with the ‘comicosmopolitan’, Honig works through a series of examples that traverse midcentury McCarthyism, anti-Semitism, and paranoid nationalism up through contemporary anti-fascism and abortion politics. Honig demonstrates that the comedic stylings of, for example, Natalie Wynn, Chelsea Manning and Cecily Strong represent an insurgent and theatrical truth-telling, of a sort that speaks from the margins and refuses the closet in an attempt to ‘remake the public and wean it from its constitutive, stigmatizing secrets’. Truth, Honig argues, requires constituting a community with the power to hold it.

Current historical conditions have made it more difficult to navigate and keep open the productive democratic tension embedded in the paradox of democracy. Post-truth aims to either decisively depoliticize in favour of a fixed, authoritarian, and identitarian logic of the people, or to revert to a rampant and de-stabilizing hyper-politicization, while neoliberal logics continually risk closing off contestation in favour of depoliticized technocracy. Our avenues of response, meanwhile, seem to also dry up. This volume is an

attempt to open new, and emphasize existing, feminist modes of response that might break the deadlock in the post-truth discourse.

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## Notes

1. This is not to say that feminists have not addressed post-truth, as the scholarship cited throughout this Introduction indicates. In particular, many feminist theorists have understood it as a part of a global surge of anti-democratic and right-wing authoritarian politics that puts feminist politics on the line. In addition to the philosophical and theoretical literature, significant feminist analyses have emerged from and focused on empirical accounts of the link between post-truth and anti-democratic sentiment. For instance, *The Perils of Populism* (Tobias and Stein 2022) includes essays that specifically address post-truth populism in the context of rising authoritarianism from an intersectional feminist perspective. For the relation between patriarchy and populism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, see Gould (2021). For explorations of the role of gender in right-wing populism, see (Kováts 2018). For specifically understanding right-wing populism as a movement against ‘gender ideology’, see *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).
2. ‘Shock overwhelms people’s senses; it breaks apart individuals, communities, and institutions; and it paralyzes us. Flooding the airwaves with lies presented as alternative facts, shock attenuates the practice of public deliberation and destroys the quiet of critical reflection. It is disorienting’ (Honig 2021, xvi).
3. In their introduction to a special issue on gender and the rise of the global far right, Graff, Kapur and Walters describe the appropriation of emancipatory language as an explicit strategy (2019, 543).
4. Linda Zerilli has argued that fact-checking can only be an adequate response to post-truth insofar as it is part of a broader practice of truth-telling as prefigurative world building (2020, 19).
5. Vogelmann (2018) similarly analyses the technocratic and even authoritarian danger of a post-truth diagnosis that presupposes that politics must yield to the authority of truth.
6. In their discourse analysis of post-truth, Farkas and Schou (2020) have argued that most responses to post-truth presuppose a specific, truth-centred understanding of democracy.
7. During his 2008 campaign for US President, Barack Obama famously said of some Americans ‘They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them’. He was pilloried across the political spectrum for these comments. white, rural, working class, Christian evangelical voters have a form of life that cannot simply be dismissed or discounted, even as this form of life is bound up with patriarchy and White supremacy.
8. Feminist realism also recognizes the ways that feminist theory depends on (but sometimes loses touch with) the movement politics of intersectional political struggle (Collins 2011).
9. For whiteness as an assumed and implicit background to politics and policy alike, see Wekker (2016). For a discussion of white supremacy in relation to class and authoritarian politics, see Redecker (2020).

10. We could say that rationalism (or certainly hyper-rationalism) is itself not realistic, that it evades reality even as it remains quite comfortable with the status quo.
11. Arendt describes the relation between truth and politics as an exercise in walking the narrow path between on one side the coercive and politics-foreclosing nature of truth, and on the other the need for a shared factual world to disagree about (Arendt 1968b).
12. As Arendt argues in the chapter on 'Ideology and Terror' from *Origins of Totalitarianism*, ideology is impervious to experience. She writes, for instance, that 'ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience from which it cannot learn anything new even if it is a question of something that has just come to pass. Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a "truer" reality' (1968a, 470). Without delving here into the convergences and divergences between ideological thinking and post-truth, we can nonetheless see a similar process in the way that post-truth allows purported 'facts' to float free of material reality.
13. 'Since the liar is free to fashion his 'facts' to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller' (1968b, 251). Still, lies can be almost too perfect, while reality has a contingency that might in the end actually be what sustains its vulnerable resilience.
14. Agonistic democracy has sometimes not been material enough, and in its focus on countering depoliticization has perhaps too often forgotten the importance of maintaining stable structures as an arena for democratic contestation.
15. Without being unduly optimistic, we note that US voters in the 2022 midterm elections were seemingly willing to hear the message that 'democracy itself is at stake' and to respond. We take this not as vindication for naïve utopianism or progressivism but as evidence that many people are, in fact, still attached (even committed) to democracy and its ideals.
16. Indeed the essays focusing on the comical might in fact be the essays that have the least faith in restoring a common world – the comic is perhaps a way to deal with an already irreparable situation (as in gallows humour).

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