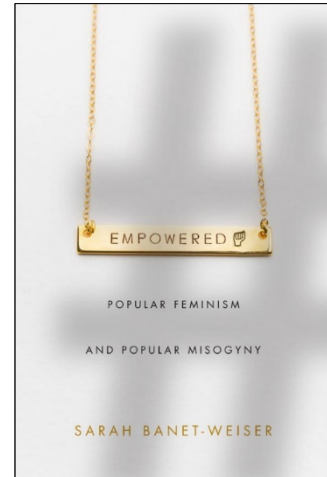


Sarah Banet-Weiser, **Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, 220 pp., \$29.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Younghan Cho
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea

In order to answer the question “How can American women be so much trouble at the same time that they are supposed to be so blessed?”, Faludi (1991, p. x) identifies various counterattacks against women and the feminist movement in American popular culture, which she refers to as the backlash. More than a couple of decades later, Banet-Weiser also encounters a similar but different situation in which popular feminism is gaining more visibility and popularity, but simultaneously popular misogyny also emerges as a structural force in culture and politics. In **Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny**, Sarah Banet-Weiser attempts to theorize about this intertwined relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. She starts her book by recollecting her observation of the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States and her conversations with her 15-year-old daughter. In *Empowered*, she parses several campaigns such as Always’s #LikeAGirl, Love Your Body, Black Girls Code, and various cultural phenomena in the United States, including advertisements from CoverGirl and *InStyle* as well as YouTube. Drawing on her analyses of popular cultures both on- and offline, she illuminates the ways in which popular feminisms become visible because they do not challenge deep structures of inequalities and instead function to provoke hegemonic masculinity and to rebound men’s organizations and their campaigns against women.



The book attempts to provide a better and deeper understanding of the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny in the economy of visibility in two ways. One is to illuminate and theorize the ways in which popular misogyny emerges as a structural force, and the other is to explicate the twinned discourses of capacity and injury. First, Banet-Weiser clarifies her intention that “*Empowered* explores and theorizes this networked characteristic of popular feminism and locates it within a dynamic relationship with a similarly networked popular misogyny” (p. 9). In this dynamic, she argues that the central strategies of popular feminism are mirrored and rerouted for the activities and purposes of popular misogyny. Second, this book explicates the logic of capacity and injury that work as a mechanism of self-discipline and self-branding in the neoliberal world. She demonstrates how the logic of capacity and injury is activated both in popular feminism and popular misogyny through their seminal themes such as empowerment, sentimental earnestness, shaming, confidence, and even rage.

The book is structured to analyze both the basic mechanism and these seminal themes that contribute to constructing the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. In its first chapter, *Empowered* meticulously explicates the basic mechanism in which popular misogyny recognizes and then distorts the strategy, concept, and campaigns of popular feminism, which is called the idea of mirroring. As a response to feminine power, the mirroring of popular misogyny works via parody and jokes,

but also takes shape in a hostile and violent reaction, including death threats, doxing (revealing personal information), online harassment, and revenge porn. In this mechanism, Banet-Weiser criticizes popular feminism's proliferation in "digital media and its affordances, its commitment to capitalism, its expanded markets and its circulation capabilities" (p. 18). She looks into popular feminism's campaigns and girls' performances on YouTube, which emerge as a central media mechanism in the form of aspirational labor in an economy of visibility.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, provide accounts of how shame, confidence, and competence play out in the way of shaping the relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny. First, *Empowered* delves into the mechanism of misogynistic public shaming, particularly through shaming the female body. Banet-Weiser demonstrates that shame becomes a tool of self-discipline in campaigns such as Love Your Body, in which girls' self-esteem turns out to be a branded commodity. By illuminating the case of actress Jennifer Lawrence and girls who post videos such as "Am I pretty?" on YouTube, she poignantly argues that "public shaming is used as a way to recuperate masculine identity, to realize the capacity of masculinity" (p. 89). She also suggests that the frame of confidence within popular feminism and popular misogyny is about economic confidence. In popular misogyny, particularly, confidence is also extended to the sexual level, meaning the ability to seduce a woman. In this mechanism, confidence is easily transformed into an individual personality that becomes commodified and then comfortably circulates in an economy of visibility.

In exploring the theme of competence, Banet-Weiser turns her attention to the technology industries in which toxic geek masculinity is suggested as a vicious manifestation of popular misogyny. Fragility or precariousness in the popular representation of geek masculinity requires a constant maintenance of masculinity and, consequently, a call to arms. She argues that toxic geek masculinity "encourages violence against women, and creates a context within science and technology communities that is not only unwelcoming but dangerous" (p. 154). After tracing several themes that connect popular feminism and popular misogyny, she arrives at the conclusion that rage is the central logic between popular feminism and popular misogyny. She further argues that "feminist logics of confidence, competence, self-esteem and sexual agency are rerouted by popular misogyny" (p. 172), which leads to structural sexism and racism.

Overall, *Empowered* successfully demonstrates that the failure of popular feminism and rise of popular misogyny are made possible through networked media platforms in the context of neoliberalism. Banet-Weiser underscores that the emphasis on the individual, not structure, as well as the ignorance of intersectionality of popular feminism contribute to circulating popular misogyny and its activities. Nonetheless, the question that she recognizes but does not provide a thorough answer to is how we can articulate the differences between progressive feminism and popular feminism, so we can continue to encourage and mobilize feminist political practice. In explicating the failure of popular feminism, furthermore, she tends to generalize the condition of neoliberalism without explicating its specificity and actualization in the networked media platform of the United States. It is easy to blame neoliberalism for the failure of popular feminism in the economy of visibility, but without illuminating the singular and specific natures of neoliberalism, it is hard to figure a way to challenge and transform its structures.

Empowered is particularly useful for expanding a nuanced understanding of the variegated natures of masculinities and their interconnection with femininities in the age of neoliberalism. Following Connell's (2005) pioneering works on masculinities, Banet-Weiser succeeds at illuminating the hegemonic masculinity of our time, which is "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relation, a position always contestable" (p. 76). Particularly when it comes to the networked media platform, Banet-Weiser highlights that geek masculinity emerges as hegemonic popular misogyny. While popular misogyny shores up hegemonic masculinities, hegemonic popular misogyny functions not only as a way to consolidate a cultural will to humiliation but also as a route to promulgate violence. Popular misogyny is not only visible in the media, discourses, and representation, but also in various types of threats, harassments, and physical and structural violence toward women.

At the same time, the book provides a critical assessment of postfeminism or popular feminism, and its failure in the current cultural politics of the United States. While popular feminism gains its popularity and visibility both online and offline, Banet-Weiser argues that the strategies of popular feminism rely on the logic of an economy of visibility, criticizing that visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end. In so doing, popular feminism is absorbed in neoliberal logics such as self-care despite its recognition of vast gender inequalities. Her profoundly critical analysis of popular feminism would be a good reference even to global scholars and readers who have also come to witness the unprecedented popularity of feminism as well as the backlash, including various types of misogyny. In particular, her work is beneficial to scholars who are also invested in understanding and examining various forms of emotions and affect, including hate speech and hate politics, in the context of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

In conclusion, *Empowered* presents insightful as well as bold arguments on the current status of popular feminism and its networked natures with popular misogyny. Banet-Weiser criticizes popular feminism and popular feminists for not challenging structures of inequalities, capitalism, mainstream politics, and patriarchy, which still refuse intersectionality and consequently adhere to specific exclusion, heteronormativity, and heterosexuality. At the same time, she firmly holds on to her hope for social change and optimism through critical writing that continues to transfigure "the rage of popularity into a powerful rage, an intersectional, collective rage, directed at a racist and sexist structure" (p. 185).

References

Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.