Argumentum ad misericordiam: the cultural politics of victim media


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Abstract
This article discusses the widespread use of victim tropes in contemporary Anglo-American culture by using cultural theory to analyse key social media memes circulating on Facebook in 2015. Since the growth of social media, victim stories have been proliferating; victim narratives are rhetorical, they are designed to elicit pity and shame the perpetrator. They are deployed to stimulate political debate and activism, often to appeal to an all-purpose humanitarianism. Victimology has its origins in Law and Criminology, but this paper opens up the field more broadly to think about the cultural politics of victimhood, to consider how the victim-figure can be appropriated by/for different purposes, particularly racial and gender politics, including in the case of Rachel Dolezal. In formulating an ethical response to the lived experience of victims, we need to consider the different kinds of critical intimacies elicited by such media.

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Introduction: Victim Media

Internet shaming memes infamously kicked off in 2005 with uploaded mobile phone footage of the “Dog Poop Girl”. This unfortunate South Korean student violated norms by not cleaning up after her dog on the subway. Her subsequent global humiliation forced her to quit university, and threaten suicide if the subsequent online harassment and misogyny didn’t stop. This was a very gendered attack on appropriate femininity. It is impossible to imagine a man receiving the same kind of global opprobrium for not ‘cleaning up after himself’.

The relentless stream of miscellaneous injustices on social media requires instant reactions to ‘like’ or ‘share’, creating momentary global juries. On the face of it, this is what Habermas has critiqued as the refeudalization of the public sphere, the idea that the media create a chimeric public where none existed. Outrage is transient, but it mobilises feeling that is structured by the grammar of Newsfeed, as byte sized portions of indignance. Like the eye of Sauron, social media algorhythms show us what is trending, what memes to click, the technology responsive to transient human attention – and what is rolling gathers speed. It can breed social reinforcement on a grand and frightening scale.¹ Social media creates victims by shaming those who break social norms, but social media also depends idiomatically on a stream of victim narratives that permeate our mediascapes and coalesce into momentary structures of feeling. I call this phenomenon ‘victim media’.

I’m defining victim media as texts, circulating in the public sphere, that present a figure of injury that hails the viewer and inculcates in her/him a feeling of pity. An appeal to pity – *argumentum ad misericordiam* – is when the recipient’s emotions are mobilised in order to win an argument. Aroused in the viewer are affective responses that as a secondary effect, can mobilize collective feelings of shame, and behavioural actions of shaming as a form of retribution. Victim media constitute a specific genre of popular representation, they are ubiquitous in media industries and subcultural or oppositional discourses; their circulation is designed to elicit moral responses and create new audiences of outrage in the court of public opinion. This works through the process of identification. Actually, there are two processes involved: of identification
with the victim, and critical disidentification with the perpetrator. Victim media does stuff: it is a speech act that elicits feeling, and it compels further dissemination in order to increase feeling. It is a form of remote witnessing, and has been disparagingly called ‘clicktivism’, an evaluation that is affiliated with the disparagement of popular culture from the standpoint of bourgeois anomie. Nevertheless, social media users are encountering victim stories in unprecedented quantities, we have never had a time quite like this before, in which victim stories can mobilise mass responses with almost startling simultaneity.

In this article I will be considering victim culture, and victim media; I begin by considering the trope of victimhood in public culture, its cultural politics, its power to mobilize historically both the political Left and Right and its narrative rhetoric. I go on to problematize victimhood’s effects, but will argue that its primary effect is to mobilise shame, which can have specific contributory impacts in the form of political and social change. My case study material was selected as indicative content of key, trending, social media memes circulating on one social/global media platform (Facebook, the world’s largest with one billion active users) during the specific period of Spring/Summer 2015. I examined real-time feeds for 1.5 hours a day for six months, using opinion mining/sentiment analysis and text analytics to select major trending stories, I provide a summary of victim types and I selected one particular case to examine more deeply, that of Rachel Dolezal. As a Cultural Studies scholar specialising in the cultural politics of identity and affect, my main methodology was discourse analysis, underpinned by the politics of representation and feminist theory. As scholars concerned with social justice, we need more reflection on how victims become recognised, and for what purpose; we need to understand more critically how victimhood narratives and tropes are deployed in popular culture, specifically media cultures; and we need more insight into the political efficacy of victimhood claims through shaming. This article is intended to provoke such thoughts.

**Angry White Men**

It is nearly a decade since the right-wing British think-tank Civitas produced its polemical and clumsily entitled *We’re (Nearly) All Victims Now* (2006), in which its Director David Green stated:
Everyone wants to be a victim, now that victim status brings preferential treatment, compensation, immunity from criticism, and the services of the police force and the courts to intimidate those who insult you. (2006; back cover)

Green, a libertarian, posed the dubious calculation that 73% of the British population were now categorised as ‘victims’, arguing that such group victimhood is incompatible with a national heritage of liberal democracy, in which the individual is the primary agent. He concluded by calling contemporary society a “victimocracy”, based on the common-sense idea that victims gain legitimacy, and allegedly a privileged status due to ‘inherited’ characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality. In Green’s view victimhood is a political tool in contemporary claims against the state, and in that claim I am kind of in agreement, in as much as victimhood claims had been successful in mobilising government discourses of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism under New Labour (Smith, Munt and Yip 2016); collective grievances have historically been viable for forcing political change. However, where I disagree with Green is where he then goes onto argue that this state of play entrenches social divisions and creates a carnival out of oppression; Green enquires whether “the victims [have] become the oppressors, as [George] Orwell warned?” (2006; ix), and he co-opts Orwell’s famous aphorism that “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”2. Thus does neoliberalism invert social relations, with subjugated groups supposedly enacting the Terror in their cruel pursuit of ‘Everyman’.

Green perceived victimhood as a kind of cult of the Left, a mob-induced weakness that the proud Englishman must valiantly resist with the thrust of his stiff upper lip. Green’s paranoid masculinity belongs in the Anglo-American territory of Angry White Men (AWMs), a social category that had been identified in the USA in the 1990s which described the backlash by neo-conservative men against the liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly feminism. By this time, a watered down version of their precepts had became embedded within equal opportunities policies of the global North. The shield of victimhood was re-enlisted by AWMs (particularly in the USA), who rightly perceived a threat to their dominant white masculinity. They flocked to talk radio in the USA, fabricating “political correctness”, and complaining about the “pussification of America”. AWM’s perceived
marginalisation has resulted in the twenty-first century growth of grassroots Tea Party Republicanism, in a classic piece of resentment. Micheal Kimmel (2013) interviewed dozens of them for his book Angry White Men, concluding that AWMs suffered from an “aggrieved entitlement” to a loss of benefits that they believed to be rightfully theirs, their anachronistic and nostalgic grasp of masculinity and whiteness having being superseded by more flexible, pluralistic versions. The actual losses of working class men, crystallised by the destruction of labour and industry and the changing faces of masculinity, has led to much misdirected rage against ‘Femi-Nazis’ and ‘Mulch-iculturalism’. The alienation of AWMs, and more worryingly, young AWMs or YAWMs, has seen their anger and frustration spiral into even more victimised subjectivities. (This is also rendered in the cycle of abuse, of course, that perpetrators of abuse almost always see themselves as victims.)

Now, we see dominant groups, and even government propaganda, frequently using such persecutory rhetoric in public discourse to mobilize Right-wing support; we saw this daily in the UK in the run up to Brexit during Spring 2106, and later that year in the dire apotheosis of Donald Trump in his bid for the American Presidency. Parallel to this, has been the political economy and institutionalisation of victimhood, in the huge industry of legal professionals involved in fomenting a compensation culture, a culture of blame. Third sector organisations are also bound to that political economy, working on behalf of victims, becoming their proxies, the strong protecting the weak (in all of the complex relations of patronage and benefaction that arise). This raises of course some difficult policy dilemmas, as the rights of the individual can become incompatible with the rights of the social group. Victimology therefore, has an unstable latency, which can be co-opted by a range of political investments.

The Micro-aggressions of Daily Life
Recently Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning (2014) have argued for the emergence of a global victimhood culture that is distinct from the honour cultures and dignity cultures anthropologists have identified in the past. Their research has gathered evidence of what Derald Wing Sue (2010) has previously called the “micro-aggressions” of daily life:

…the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile,
derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. (2010, 5)

The presence of such micro-aggressions mobilised outrage in the past few years particularly on US university student campus blogs, which exposed and shamed supposed instances of offensive conduct. Campbell and Manning point out that such online disclosures have sought to attract more powerful third parties (such as university managers) in order to mobilise their support. More problematically, Campbell and Manning assert that “these tactics sometimes involve building a case for action by documenting, exaggerating, or even falsifying offenses.” (2014, 695).

The result, they say, begets “a culture of victimhood in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance” (ibid). They argue, quite subtly, that the relative cultural empowerment of North American university students demonstrates an ethos of entitlement, and that actually the “real” socially disadvantaged are too inferior to bother with appeals to a higher status third party for support, as they are so unlikely to receive it. The authors go on to describe how on these online blogs victimhood is perceived as virtuous, and that it raises the moral status of the victim. They argue that the culture of victimhood is most entrenched on university campuses, as environments that are keenly concerned with social status. I think that Campbell and Manning have a point – that student politics are certainly intense and young people can be perceived as having fragile ego-formation.³

However, one problem with Campbell and Manning’s study is that it collapses all cultural insults together as equivalent, and fails to recognise the historical processes of social change that such protests can mobilize.⁴ Micro-aggressions can chip away at the soul, forming little fragments of shame that sever a sense of connection. Micro-aggressions can then push people together in shame formations that consolidate victimhood, yes, but consequentially the energy and emotion mobilised can make new kinds of connections (Munt 2007). Think how galvanising a physical insult can be, consider how the body races to the site, how the blood rushes in, how the heartbeat quickens and the adrenaline flash-floods, all in order to make new, reparative structures.
Conversely, such discourses can feed the AWM. Take this March 2016 email to the British *Guardian* newspaper from an anonymous American academic – presumably, a colleague:

I’m a liberal-left college professor in the social sciences. I’m going to vote for Trump but I won’t tell hardly anybody.

My main reason is anger at the two-party system and the horrible presidencies of Obama and Bush. But I’m also furious at political correctness on campus and in the media.

I’m angry at forced diversity and constant, frequently unjustified complaints about racism/sexism/homophobia/lack of trans rights. I’m particularly angry at social justice warriors and my main reason to vote Trump is to see the looks on your faces when he wins.

It’s not that I like Trump. It’s that I hate those who can’t stand him. I want them to suffer the shock of knowing all their torrents of blog posts and Tumblr bitch-fests and “I just can’t...” and accusations of mansplaining didn’t actually matter. That they’re still losing. And that things are not getting better for them.

They’re getting worse. (3rd March 2016)

Envy, hatred, fury, the desire to humiliate – all emotions allied to shame. This man is *ashamed* and his response is to enact revenge through reverse victimisation.

**Archetypal Victim Tropes**

Victimhood is ideologically neutral, such is its manipulability, that it can be appropriated by and for anyone with a grievance. I am concerned here to identify something of how victims get recognised, by whom and for what purpose. Despite being an unfilled sign, it has some customary deployments and clichéd configurations, I suggest a brief, initial (incomplete) typography here:

i) The Abject White Man

Western cultures have been predominantly Christian for nearly two thousand years, a foundational belief system that owns as its primary icon a victim, perhaps The Victim – the persecuted Christ. The Biblical gospels portray the humiliation and suffering of Christ’s last days, as he conveyed the heavy cross through the spitting and jeering crowds. Simulacra of his death from crucifixion adorn hundreds of millions of buildings and homes across the globe, it is the most ubiquitous sign in the world. The
colonial era has ensured that this image of the noble victim has disseminated across all parts of the earth. Radical Christians are urged to participate in what is called ‘victim theology’, a revalorisation of the deprived, the derided, and the downtrodden, indeed, following a long spiritual tradition of humiliation, Christians are invited to become like Jesus himself, to abase themselves and draw joy from carrying their own metaphoric crosses. This abject white man is a figure of religious glory, because suffering brings reward. Christians can value this symbolic power of victims, and through them, acquire a bit of reflected holiness. Nowadays, the link between religious practise and ordinary life is more tenuous, however this valorisation of victimhood remains an undercurrent in western belief systems, and it is underpinned by the masochistic masculinity of a man who is wronged.\(^6\)

ii) The Good White Woman/Bad Black Man Binary
The archetypal good victim remains the respectable, cisgendered white woman. Think, for example, of those early flickering film clips of a steam train thundering toward a virgin tied to the tracks. Think also of the history of lynching in the southern United States, where even looking at a ‘pure’ white woman could result in being hung at the end of a rope. The archetype of the pure white feminine victim is endemic to Anglo-American media cultures. The inverse logic of this white woman victim ensures a black male perpetrator, a binary narrative structure that forms part of the western, overtly North American, racial unconscious, and it is made self-evident in the association of young black males with criminality and gangs. In Europe, this binary is just as likely to be the Good White Woman/Bad Brown Man as indicated by the moral panic around the alleged sexual assaults by refugees in the German city of Cologne on New Years Eve 2015/6.\(^7\) Thus we can also see how the sign of victim can transfer across different injured subjectivities, where it can affix according to culturally specific binaries and nationally specific imperialist histories.

iii) The Tyrannized Muslim Woman
Steeped in Orientalist projections about a powerless, exploited, dependent, subservient and victimised brown woman, this particular typology is currently crystallizing around three popular controversies: the wearing of the hijab or veil, the tradition of “honour killings”, and the ongoing practise of female genital mutilation
[FGM]. Women ‘under’ Islam are universally seen in Anglo-American public discourse as sexually controlled victims of a timeless and transglobal patriarchal cult, irrespective of their national identity, geographical location, caste or class, or ethnicity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her famous essay “Under Western Eyes” (1988), written 30 years ago, took issue back then with feminists who theorized an undifferentiated, single monolithic subject, the “Third World Woman”, as eternally oppressed with no voice. Islamic Feminism and Muslim Feminism has consistently challenged these reductive depictions of the passive, victimised body of the Other, but the trope persists.

iv) The Innocent Child
Anthropologist (and lover of Margaret Mead) Ruth Benedict (1934) was the first to write about the ways in which childhood is constructed in the West (or global North, as we would say now); this idea was later taken up the by the anarchist and historian Philippe Aries (1960) who argued that childhood was an invention of the modern age. Nostalgic constructions of childhood are of course ubiquitous, and the powerful symbol of the child has been much deconstructed, more recently in queer theory by Lee Edelman (2004). Children are perhaps overdetermined as victims, but the veracity of their victimhood is racially hierarchical: consider the global media hysteria concerning the missing middle class white English girl Madeleine McCann, who was snatched from Praia da Luz, Portugal in 2007. Dubbed “Missing White Woman Syndrome” by broadcaster and political analyst Gwen Ifill, there have been various studies of media disproportionality by scholars who critique the racialization of such victims (including Liebler 2010). Certainly the disappearance of “Madeleine” represented the classic narrative of a fairy-tale blonde little girl abductee. White girls tend to be over-represented in the media as victims of abuse, whereas boys are primarily represented as troublemakers or perpetrators, particularly if they are poor.8
The ‘starving African child’ is a cliché of charity fundraising, cementing the colonialist fantasy of African dependency. Indeed not only are children often victims, but victims are frequently infantilised, irrespective of age, a diminution of their value and agency that appeals to colonialist sentiment and structures of paternalism. The child/victim too is culturally embedded in Christianity, in Jesus’s appeal in the Gospels: “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (Luke 18 v. 16).9
v) The Wan White Queer

The construction of the victim has been a powerful organising symbol for many political and human rights movements, as James Baldwin wrote in 1976 “the victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he or she has become a threat”.10 This is something that Radclyffe Hall grasped all too well after the 1928 trial for obscenity for *The Well of Loneliness* (1926), the first (white, upper class) lesbian novel.11 The first film about homosexuality, *Victim* (1961) starring Dirk Bogarde and Sylvia Sims did much to mobilize awareness after the 1957 Wolfenden Report to support the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in the UK 1967 Sexual Offences Act. The tragic homosexual, often in a bohemian context, is a stereotype of sexual representation, and in 1950s and 1960s pulp fiction, its female counterpart the butch lesbian, like *Sister George*, almost always ended her life in shame, despair and/or suicide. Richard Dyer has written about the representation of the sad young man as a gay stereotype, observing that it may be that there is also something specifically white about him,

[T]he sad young man’s difference from black gay men is stressed and this perhaps has to do with the stereotype’s roots in Christianity and the Romantic poets… The sad young man becomes part of much wider constructions of white identity in terms of suffering (the burden which becomes the badge of our superiority. (2002, 124)

A pale, ill male body with downcast eyes is associated with limp femininity, passivity, and emotionality. The stereotype of the white, middle class American man dying nobly of AIDS has been a stock character since the 1980s. It is linked representationally to Christ’s male masochism, mentioned above. Dyer talks about this “delicious melancholia” (2002, 134), and the wistful pleasures of identifying with him.

As the era of comprehensive homosexual shame becomes more remote from the everyday experiences of young western and urban queers, there appears to be less necessity for such victim presentations, and more interest in playing with shame and victimhood as an erotic or existential device. Recuperating victimhood by creating agentic victims seems like a skilful response to global shaming. An early instance of this shift was seen in the rise of queer cinema in the 1990s, typically in the Jean Genet-inspired spitting scene in the prison garden in *Poison* (1991). However, erotic
teasing using shame/victimhood conjunctions, seems chiefly to be a preoccupation of gay white men, who appear to be queering the male masochism/femininity victim-motif.\textsuperscript{12}

**Recognition/Misrecognition and Legitimacy**

The flip side of staking a claim of victimhood is the equally gendered snare of sexual crimes going disbelieved, and genuine victims going unrecognised. Even as I reluctantly deploy that word ‘genuine’ – or its synonyms ‘real, undisputable, true, legitimate, actual, valid’ - and so on, it presses the issue of the victim dilemma: that of sorting out the authentic victim from the inauthentic. There is a credibility compulsion attached to victimhood, an anxious unverifiability in which the public is required to judge both the severity and legitimacy of the rhetoric being deployed.\textsuperscript{13}

There have been other famous cases in older media in which individuals have felt drawn to inscribe the role of victim, that have used ‘race’ or ethnicity as a framework to pass, and who have been exposed and shamed by an angry public. Curiously, the literary genre of pain and suffering, “misery lit”, which is assumed to be narrowly biographical, and usually adopts the form of bildungsroman\textsuperscript{14}, is somewhat notorious for victim hoaxes. There have been a number of books that claim to be stories of protagonist’s experiences that have been exposed and shamed as fakes, or part-fakes, and even one whose author won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The cult novel *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) was a bestseller at a point in time when non-white women’s narratives gained limited popularity within the liberal intelligentsias of the USA and Europe, following the gains made by feminism and the Left-wing protest movements of the 1970s. It concerns a Guatemalan peasant whose taped memories were transcribed, translated and edited by a French anthropologist. David Stoll, a US anthropologist, wrote an exposé or refutation of Menchú’s story in 1999 that documented how the book operated to serve the needs of the ideological Left in Guatemala and fomented the vision of Latin American revolution that mobilized foreign support for the insurgency. He also cautioned how the image of voiceless victimhood presented through the character of Menchú herself - the symbol created - of sacred sacrifice, nurtured western projections of subaltern subjects. It took a white man to expose a brown woman’s lies. In 1997, Menchú herself disavowed the narrative, and accused her editor Elisabeth Burgos of distortion,
claiming “That is not my book”. This pattern of claim and counter-claim besieges all victim speech acts.

In Katheryn Russell-Brown’s book *The Color of Crime* (2009) she describes a number of racial hoaxes in the USA, ninety-two cases between 1987 and 2006. A racial hoax is said to take place either when someone fabricates a crime and blames it on another person because of his race, or when an actual crime has been committed and the perpetrator falsely blames someone because of his race. The majority of racial hoaxes are involving white people who accuse black people falsely of committing a crime (63%). In 12% of cases, hoaxers were officers of the court or police. Russell-Brown describes how:

In one hoax incident that defies classification, a White Louisiana woman told police that she had been sexually assaulted by a Black man. She said the attacker had a tattoo of a serpent on his arm. A police sketch of the rapist was widely circulated in Baton Rouge. In a bizarre twist, twenty-eight other women notified the police that they, too, had been assaulted by the imaginary “serpent man”. The high number of copycat victims suggests more than the usual hysteria associated with criminals on the loose. Within days, the alleged victim confessed that she had made up the rape story. (2009, 107)

Russell-Brown also mentions cases in which white perpetrators dress up in Blackface in order to commit crime in order to have their guilt racially displaced.

Each and every victim meme requires the viewer to judge its legitimacy, using the scopophilic dynamics of recognition, misrecognition, and wilful misrecognition. Victimhood is a hook, a rhetorical device, and crucially a structure of asymmetrical, non-reciprocal recognition – something which Hegel (1977) was onto when he wrote about the master/slave dialectic. The rise of the politics of recognition is of course historically congruent with the rise of neoliberalism, heralding the supremacy of the individual; thus an emergent subjectivity is intrinsically dependent on recognition, on an act of (self)-representation, of mutual co-constitution, of seeing things for what they are (or, via misrecognition or misrepresentation, are not).

Perhaps this accounts for why so many people are fascinated by the ‘face’ of victimhood. When news of a massacre breaks out on broadcast news, the viewer
holds her breath until the faces of the victims can be seen, which supplies essential emotional veracity. Faces trigger empathy more easily than the nebulosity of a group or the “faceless hordes”, the root of empathy is from the German Einfühlung, literally “feeling into”, like looking into someone’s eyes. The face of Cecil the Lion with his jewelled eyes and flowing black mane garnered worldwide protest about the colonial tradition of canned shooting in Africa, in summer 2015; Cecil was juxtaposed with the face of the guilty, the wicked shiny-toothed dentist, for the faces of the guilty also have to be displayed, for purposes of shame (Munt 2007). By sharing a victim post, the user is performing a speech act, one that declaims to the perpetrator “I shame you”. The victim trope is a sign addressed to an audience, it hails the viewer and because of shame’s seepage, shame’s contagion, the viewer becomes inculcated with this shame, a co-opted by a digital shaming collectivity. (She also experiences humiliation if the post is subsequently proved to be false.) Included in this shaming act is voyeurism, and possibly a taste of schadenfreude – delight at the misfortune of others. These are all reflective movements, of the self-regarding-self, and the self appraising the other (it is also why the faceless are seen as shameless, and covering the face implies shame) (Munt 2007).

**Victimhood and Authenticity: the case of Rachel Dolezal**

Let us consider one stark example of victim media from 2015 – the case of African-American rights activist, Rachel Dolezal, her exposé and her subsequent global shaming. Dolezal was the President of the Spokane branch of the august USA National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. She was also a professor of African American Studies at the Eastern Washington University. Despite having white Czech and German ancestry (with arguably, ‘one drop’ of Native American blood), Dolezal, who grew up with black adopted siblings and who married a black man, describes herself as either black or mixed race. In 2015 the broadcast, independent and social media – and particularly right-wing media - became fixated with this story of a “disgraced race activist”, the fulcrum of which was an interview with her white parents in which they exposed her racial identity as a ‘fake’ and suggested she “seek professional help”. Dolezal has clearly identified with African American culture and identity most of her adult life, including attending Howard University to study African American art. We might conject that in her career
she has developed a strong identification with social justice and indeed with victims, for whatever reason. There are unverifiable comments on social media that Dolezal felt that her black siblings were racially abused by her parents, which caused her longstanding indignation, and perhaps her white shame. So – Rachel Dolezal felt herself to be a victim, she identified with victims, and this led her to her downfall and consequent extreme victimisation by global media which exposed her victimism as a lie (and by association, discrediting race activists en masse as ‘deceivers’).

Such supposed unmaskings are intended to shame the perpetrator into a confession. But Dolezal resolutely continues to insist that she is black, and lives as black, irrespective of her genetic parentage. She also refuses the media’s disciplinary urge to ‘put her in her place’, for she is a woman who ‘will not be told’. Presumably Dolezal will be aware of Malcolm X’s cry, “I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream – I see an American nightmare”. The case of Dolezal tackled the common-sense that ‘race’ is intrinsic, and written on the body, it raised to public view the instability of ‘race’, and the (predominantly white) world strongly objected. Dolezal still hangs onto this ‘truth’ of her own blackness, via her purposeful identification with her black siblings and her critical disidentification with her white parents. In spite of the public protests; what she refuses to relinquish is not just her transferential victimhood but also the political voice she has found by dint of it.

Amazon is currently advertising Dolezal’s In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World scheduled for publication in 2017. The promotional text is instructive:

A lot of people think they know what Rachel Doležal is. Race faker. Liar. Opportunist. Crazy bitch. But they don’t get to decide who Rachel Doležal is. …With In Full Color, Rachael Doležal describes the path that led her from being a child of white evangelical parents to an NAACP chapter president and respected educator and activist who identified as black. Along the way, she’ll discuss the deep emotional bond she formed with her four adopted black siblings, the sense of belonging she felt while living in black communities in Jackson, Mississippi and Washington, D.C., and the discrimination she’s suffered while living as a black woman.
Her story is nuanced and complex, and in the process of telling it, she forces us to consider race in an entirely new light—not as a biological imperative, but as a function of the experiences we have, the culture we embrace, and, ultimately, the identity we choose.\(^ {17}\) [My italics]

The case that Dolezal makes here is deeply problematic, embedded as it is within neoliberal discourses of individual choice, inscribed by the white bourgeois practises of ‘self’ and ‘self-determination’ (Skeggs 2004), via perhaps an over-identification, misjudged ‘claim’. Dolezal’s undeniable victimisation, by her parents, and by a predominantly white mainstream media rebuilds her victimhood through a racial lens.

Racial passing, or performing whiteness, has a long history, of course, in which ‘black’ people are assumed to pass themselves off as ‘white’ in order for social advancement. Less well known is the practise of ‘white’ people passing as ‘black’, and so ill-known in fact that many people took Rachel Dolezal’s actions to being an isolated case, framing it as some kind of mental instability (femininity and madness being discursively linked\(^ {18}\)). Yet minstrelsy and blackface has been part of western popular culture for 150 years.\(^ {19}\) Minstrelsy operates on a central conceit, that cultural forms can be performed and exchanged, untying the knot of corporeal authenticity but also challenging the idea that cultural forms can be ‘owned’. Minstrelsy has attracted heated debate, for example in the case of Cornwall’s ‘Darkie Days’ where local residents blacken their faces and tour the town singing songs.\(^ {20}\) Minstrelsy differs from Dolezal’s case however because in this self-conscious theatrical performance the racial crossing is done as trickery, or parody, and framed as inauthentic.\(^ {21}\) Perhaps Dolezal’s intentions were initially along the lines of John Howard Griffin’s story in *Black Like Me* (1961), in which a white man stained his face and hitch-hiked through the American Deep South, in order to better comprehend racism; we don’t know. Maybe she doesn’t know.

In the case of Dolezal, apparently, white people could not consciously comprehend why a white person would want to pretend to be (authentically) black, yet racial envy has played its historical part in postcolonial and orientalist structures of desire. In her book *Near Black: White to Black Passing in American Culture* (2008) Baz Dreisinger explored the history of what Philip Brian Harper (1998) had previously named
“reverse race passing”, from the 1830s to the present. Central to this cultural phenomenon is the notion of proximity. She argued that blackness is seen in US culture as transmittable, “proximity to blackness is invested in the power to turn whites black” (2008,3). This is reminiscent of the disease model, or the idea of contagion that is so common in homophobia (that proximity to homosexuality will make you gay).

For those whites that do cross over, there is the interesting spectre of white shame, which provokes identification with blackness (coveted) and disidentification with whiteness (reviled). This idea of whiteness as lack imagines black potency as a compensation for shame. Blackness can be performatively inscribed on a white male or female body with skin darkening (tanning or dyeing), with hairstyles, and with mannerisms that sediment into bodily habitus. I can well imagine how a shamed young personality yearning to connect might have had trouble with the entitlement of white privilege, and fly toward the phantasmic glow of black solidarity. Perhaps blackness in this instance operates as a cover, in multiple senses: a disguise and a sheath, a shelter and insurance. Dreisinger concluded that:

An ever-growing number of white Americans have entered the twenty-first century wearing, in one form or another, blackness. The desire to sport some popular conception of “blackness” – to engage in what Ishmael Reed has called “cultural tanning” – has become one of the defining features of youth culture. (2008, 121-2)

Adolescence: that uncomfortable lifestage when your whole personality is a crucible of victimhood. How convenient then, to draw down media representations and carve out an image of street blackness fresh from Chicago, an intoxicating masculinity that covers up this shame. This is a different kind of victim manoeuvre, to renounce one’s culture of entitlement (white, middle class boy from Swansea to hip hop gangsta via Jive Filter22), and desire/acquire a new urban sensibility from ‘below’. To some extent black culture - or perhaps more accurately North American black masculinities - has simply been appropriated by popular culture, so that what was formerly considered ‘authentically’ black is now not so clearly so. US black masculinities have provided a potent lexicon for insecure white masculinities, and this trope has travelled to
Europe.\textsuperscript{23} Significantly, this racial passing is not so acceptable for girls, (or middle aged women, as the Dolezal case shows).

Despite the vaunted “post-racial” America, Dreisinger, toward the end of her book, remarks:

The fact is, when it comes to talking about race, most of us speak out of both sides of our mouth. We are against race, yes, but we also like our solid selves. How, after all, does one actually live in a racial free-for-all, a world in which all identity, as Samira Kawash puts it, is “not what we are but what we are passing for”\textsuperscript{24} ... Race, rigid and old hat, lives on in our hearts and minds. Slay something – blackness, whiteness, Latino-ness – in concept and you still haven’t slain it in the flesh. (2008, 125)

“Race” remains a social imperative, but it is possible to challenge the discourse, because racial identities are performative, always vulnerable to reinscription, and always lived as an act of passing. Rachel Dolezal’s white shame taints her, rendering her unable to pass flawlessly as ‘properly’ black, or white. This reminds us that we are all victims, of the cruelty of systems, ideologies and injustices, though not all of us pose that framework as a core identity.

The Vicarious Satisfactions of Victimhood

Vicarious observation of, or participation in, rituals of trauma or loss can give a frisson of excitement, think for example of taphophiles, those many people whom just love attending funerals, or indeed professional mourners. Curiosity is said to be “morbid” and much of the Internet is driven by ‘dark tourism’, a testament to the idea that viewing victims (especially those that have died from violence) is compulsive, entertaining, and rewarding. Sontag (2003) in \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others} observed that “the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that shows bodies naked.” (2003, 36) Could our attraction to the macabre spring from a desire to experience vicariously the suffering of others? I think so. It gives us visual control over victimhood, and allows us to objectify our fears by locating them on the unfortunate bodies of far-flung others. Sontag, in her astute meditation on the representation of suffering, goes on to point out that the USA (still) does not have a Museum of Slavery. Despite having the heartrending Holocaust
Memorial Museum in Washington DC, Sontag argues that the USA prefers instead to see a history of mass victimisation at once removed, disassociating itself as a nation from “evil”: the Holocaust happened “over there” (in Europe), as opposed to Slavery, which happened “here” in the USA. It is that distanitation which procures reassurance, Sontag reminds us that even in a direct encounter of trauma, “a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation” (2003, 19). Thus, the mind scaffolds and frames trauma whether our experience of it is mediated or not. And yet Sontag goes on to remind us that “People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of narrative, does not wear out.” (2003, 74).

Victimhood can garner strange forms of prestige. Feminism has judiciously deployed the victim/agency binary since its First Wave, starting with the force-fed hunger strikers, and with the death of Emily Davison. As a young woman, I experienced the Second Wave Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1980s, which, in a misguided response to identity politics, to be a working class, disabled, black lesbian was perceived as holding a kind of “top trumps” (although I never saw people of this description actually claiming it). This inverted logic was reminiscent of the Christian rituals of self-abasement and masochism I mentioned earlier (“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many may be called, but few chosen”26). I remember an arms-length envy of those perceived to occupy low status, but generally it was the women with relative privilege playing such cards. From that time, there were inglorious examples of men who claimed that they were HIV positive, when they were not; women who claimed that they were raped, when they were not. Troubling identifications that speak to unaccountable vulnerabilities, in which victimhood conferred temporary prestige (but people who persist in such orientations are very wearing). Competitiveness over traumatic experiences belong to the consciousness-raising phase of political projects, when collective pain requires inept articulations and mutual acknowledgement in order for bonds to form.

Victimhood has a vexed duration. Sometimes being a victim is a temporary thing that passes almost as soon as the offending incident. But victimhood can stick around, it can be an event that transposes into an identity. Victimhood can affix an identity in time, drown out multivalency, and congeal emotions of rage, resentment, disgust and disgrace – produce a fog of affects that slowly sediment into grim satisfaction, create
psychological paralysis, misanthropy, and/or provoke punitive revenge. Victimhood can also comprise a pluperfect rupture in identity that goes forward through time, so that it permeates the self-to-be, so determining that you are the person to whom stuff happened (and you always will be). Victimhood has a seemly duration; there are common expectations that prescribe its temporal limits – so that rules exist for the ‘appropriate period’ of victimhood - and after which, victimhood is deemed pathological, in a “Miss Havisham Syndrome” perhaps (Charles Dickens, 1861). It is helpful to think of victimhood as having a perimeter of value, because victimhood can cling on for too long, there can be a victim trail, a smokescreen or psychic smell that can obscure other issues.

Victims are required by their own redemptive powers to become survivors or even victors, demonstrating their resilience over their own fates. Contrarily, I think of the missing stories of people living with shame in an on-going, unresolved way - especially when they are so often involved with (and/or are read within) narratives of mandatory progress.27 Heather Love (2009) has argued that trauma and loss in queer history requires our greater attention and compassion, so we can better understand how race, gender and class might render such shame narratives differently. Perhaps as witnesses we are required to mobilize politically against being shamed via tropes of victimhood, whilst also maintaining a mindful attitude to the presence of embodied shame in victimised individuals, neither requiring them to ‘improve’ nor being complacent about their suffering either.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of crowd psychology was noted over a century ago by an unpleasantly racist misogynist, Gustav Le Bon (1895), who identified the three phases of a crowd as being submergence, contagion and suggestion. All of these elements can be seen in a social media virtual crowd today, similarly with the Freudian (1921/1981) claim that crowds can unlock the unconscious mind. There is a deep seated bourgeois fear of these ‘masses’, think for example of how Adorno argued that the masses were an artificial and feminised product of a ‘managed’ modern life. Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1987) observed how disparate crowd opinion comes together in “emergent
norm theory”, which, after some initial chatter, deindividuates the voices and consolidates into a group.

We are well acquainted with the propensity of dominant subjectivities to bully the victimised Other, indeed, in what lamentably used to be called the “First World” at the moment, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers form easy targets of blame for our economic and personal insecurities. These shadowy, hooded and faceless men filmed in night-vision on Europe’s borders are like hunted animals, archetypal threats: black, stereotypically gendered villains who wish to steal our citizenship. We are well acquainted with the propensity of dominant subjectivities to bully the victimised Other, indeed, in what lamentably used to be called the “First World” at the moment, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers form easy targets of blame for our economic and personal insecurities. These shadowy, hooded and faceless men filmed in night-vision on Europe’s borders are like hunted animals, archetypal threats: black, stereotypically gendered villains who wish to steal our citizenship. 

Visually, these pictures evoke how Chamayou (2012) has linked the practice and discourse of hunting to colonial relations. It is a cliché of modernity that we are now inured to suffering, supposedly because the technologisation of tragedy has suffused our hyper-mediated lives to the extent that we have become anaesthetized. However, I believe this is rather a caricature of ‘the masses’, put forward by professional critics who believe themselves to be ‘above’ such brutalism. There are still powerful victim tropes that coalesce outrage. On social media during summer 2015 one appeal to such moral sentiments was the Facebook meme of the drowned body of a child on a Greek beach, 3 year-old Aylan Kurdi. In response, we saw ordinary Europeans reach a ‘tipping point’ of mass empathy: tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilised in support for the refugees fleeing war in Syria, who were stumbling, hungry and cold, toward southern Europe. In the face of national governments’ unconscionable protectionism, and indeed the explosion of popular racism across Europe, different national publics across the continent were galvanised by compassion for this victim-figure, to generate ground-up, cooperative efforts to relieve the suffering of refugees. Impromptu volunteer organisations such as Calais Action, the Hummingbird Project, Refugee Community Kitchen, Dirty Girls of Lesvos, - too many to mention - sprang up all over. Frida, of United Rescue Aid, posts about how seeing “Aylan’s little body” prompted her to go to the Mediterranean to help. 

This transient structure of feeling, of pity, and of empathy, mobilised through the visual prism of victimhood, represents a distinct form of digital morality. Aylan’s iconic and fragile body reminded us of the social necessity of shame (Jacquet 2015). Aylan’s death was to our shame, and because of shame’s binding propensities, collective participation in shame can lead to the potential for a more radical relationality and politics.
Chouliaraki (2006) has analysed remote media witnessing and the spectatorship of ‘distant’ suffering in humanitarian disasters in news reports. In her discussion of the aestheticisation of victimhood she observes that “Bangladeshi victims are nobodies in particular” (2006, 104), as she discusses how problematically abstract news reporting has become. In The Ironic Spectator (2013) she continues her argument about the necessity of “being affectable,” and promotes a more strategic “affective performativity” in the (media) theatre of solidarity. For the purposes of empathy, victims need a point of identification with their audience, a kind of Barthesian *punctum*, because we are all narcissists at heart. Social media renditions of victims claim our critical attention for just one brief moment, demanding our instantaneous emotional work. Responding to the complex spirals and oscillations of victimhood has become intrinsic to our mediascape, which elicits visceral reactions that can coalesce more collectively into unexpected ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1961) *and action*. Perhaps, as the feminist theorist Nancy Fraser has recently argued, if the 1990s were too obsessed with “recognition, recognition, recognition” (2016, 16), the 20teens, temporarily concussed by the political blows of Brexit/Trumpism, might see the emergence of a new political imperative of redistribution, a grassroots movement toward social justice provoked by a digital victimocracy discharging the e-motion shame. Because the cultural politics of victimhood are already consigned to an asymmetry - and indeed represent a struggle to renegotiate such asymmetries – perhaps the injustices integral to victimhood might push us forward toward a more redistributive social imaginary. Sontag’s appeal, to “[l]et the atrocious images haunt us” endures (2003, 102).

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REFERENCES


1 Even Internet shaming itself has itself been parodied, with the meme of dog shaming that first appeared in 2012.

2 See Chapter 10, ORWELL, GEORGE. 1945. Animal Farm.


The concept of triggering in relation to victimhood deserves a thorough analysis which unfortunately I cannot develop here.

4 (typically like those that challenged men’s rights to women’s bodies through the anti-rape and domestic violence protests of the 1970s).

5 “Not even my wife knows': secret Donald Trump voters speak out’


6 When the victim is a straight, white, young male, such as in the case of Lee Rigby, the British soldier who was beheaded by Islamic extremists in a London street on 22nd May 2013, the injury is iconic. The neofascist organisation Britain First controversially deploys the phrase “remember Lee Rigby” (against the wishes of Rigby’s mother) to mobilise Islamophobic activism. The cultural logic is that such a victim (the dead soldier/Christ) encapsulates the threat and horror of a ‘religious war’, and therefore seizing righteous and violent retribution is a sacred duty (against Jews, against Muslims…). It is all the more ironic of course since Jesus Christ was a Middle Eastern Jew.

7 Wikipedia is still reporting this as fact: https://en wikipedia.org/wiki/New Year%27s Eve sexual assaults in Germany

See also similar media reports (one of many) such as http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/world-economy/cologne-is-every-day-europes-rape-epidemic/news-story/e2e618e17ad4400b5ed65045e65e141d
The 2015/6 moral panic about ‘Muslim rapists’ was a social media phenomenon, despite later police reports that only 3 of the 58 men arrested came from Syria or Iraq. Reviewer 3 raised the spectre of the hyper-masculine non-white male refugee in the context of the “rape of Europe” (in nationalisms, the ‘land’ or territory is usually gendered as female). They kindly drew my attention to the cover of this Polish magazine wSieci depicting such a theme:


Accessed 30/10/16.

8 UNICEF provides a useful summary of research on media representations of children, with further references here:

elearning-events.ditie/unicef/html/unit1/1_5_2.htm

9 For a precise analysis of the visual motifs of victimhood see “Save the Child” Zarzycka (2016). Thank you to Reviewer 3 for this connection.

10 Quoted in WATNEY, SIMON. 1987, p.37.


12 Whereas white lesbians have in the past experimented with victim/shame tropes – such as in Catherine Opie’s photography (1993) – such images seem to relate more viscerally to abuse (indeed, the motif of sexual victimhood seems to have shifted discursively away from homosexuality toward child sexual abuse). Black lesbian photographers, such as South African Zanele Muholi appear to prefer a counter-discourse of heroic modes, facial portraits, and the aesthetics of presence, that in her own words constitute “visual activism… so that future generations will know that we were here” (2010, 6).

13 The idea of the model victim is enshrined within the British legal system: for example the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority reduces compensation to any victim if they hold any unrelated criminal conviction – you are deemed to be “worth less” if you have breached the law already.

14 Bildungsroman is the novel of formation, or ‘coming of age’ story.

15 the ‘one drop rule’ comes from the history of slavery and racial classification in the USA, in which having any kind of non-white inheritance would mean a racial designation as black, or negro, in historical parlance.
We might also pause to wonder for a moment at the motivation of parents who tried to extinguish their daughter’s self-identity in this way.


Indeed, I’m of the generation that used to watch the vaudeville classic The Black and White Minstrel Show with my Dad every Sunday as a child in the 1960s and ‘70s. Attitudes to minstrelsy have predominantly drawn attention to the programme’s racist stereotyping, although in a limited way it did bring black cultural forms to wider audiences.

Cornwall’s Darkie Days seem to stem from traditions of Mummery, however the singing of songs about ‘niggers’ seemingly draws from the appropriation of minstrelsy traditions of the Music Hall from the nineteenth century. There are rumours that Cornwall people used blackface to confuse landowners after a slave ship was wrecked off the Cornish coast. Certainly Cornwall has a strong history of radicalism in part due to its ethnic differentiation from the English; during the nineteenth century (similar to the Irish) they could be known colloquially as ‘white niggers’. There are conflicting explanations and it is worth reading DAVEY, M.R. 2006. to get further insight.

There is currently a Facebook photographic meme circulating which shows a photo of Caitlyn Jenner juxtaposed with a photo of Rachel Dolezal. Overlaying Jenner is the caption “Pretending to be a woman/Must accept and aprove [sic] of’; overlaying the image of Dolezal is the caption “Pretending to be Black/Unacceptable!! We Disapprove” Presumably this is anti-Trans propaganda, however I think it does point out the inconsistencies in essentializing race or gender.

Jive Filter is a computer programme that converts plain English to a dialect “jive”, a parody of African American Vernacular English see http://funtranslations.com/jive

Thank you to Malcolm James for this point.

KAWASH, SAMIRA. 1997.

Emily Davison was a suffragist who died at the Epsom Derby on 4 June 1913 when she was run over by the King’s horse.

Gospel of Matthew 20:16, King James Bible.

Thank you to Matt Brim for this observation.
Male migrants and refugees are often hyper-masculinized and seen as a physical threat, or feminized for their despised dependency; whereas female migrants and refugees are overtly feminized as cunning, crazy, or completely passive victims, depending on the context.

Online petitions have been very successful in this respect, so much so that it is part of British law that a petition on https://yougov.co.uk/ that gains over 100,000 signatories has a right to be debated in Parliament.