



Listening, or ‘led by’? Belief, innocence and the risks of a ‘survivor-led’ feminist politics

Feminist Theory

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/14647001251380418

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Abstract

Since the carceral elements of #MeToo were first observed, long-simmering debates around what it means to listen to – and indeed believe – survivors have been reignited within Anglophone feminist anti-violence work and scholarship. Using analysis of the anger that erupts on social media when seemingly carceral feminist campaigns proclaim to be ‘led by’ survivors as a starting point, this article demonstrates that – while seemingly divided – much feminist work around sexual violence is deeply affected by a ‘survivor-led’ politics. Through situating this politics within feminism’s testimonial legacies, I engage with citationally dominant texts to show that belief and listening – core principles of feminist work – have become increasingly ensnared with affective notions of innocence. The result is the production of work that is unable – or unwilling – to ask critical questions of survivor speech, and the circulation of a powerful core narrative: that because some survivors say they desire carceral outcomes, these can never be abandoned. Through asking questions around what it means to listen to, believe and respond to those who say they want carceral outcomes, I provide a thorough interrogation of the ethics and risks of the epistemological politics of being ‘survivor led’. Contending that a ‘survivor-led’ politics arises due to the affective force of a newly conceptualised figure – the figure of the wounded survivor – I argue that this politics risks furthering injustice for survivors everywhere, especially those who are deemed less ‘innocent’. I conclude by attending to the potential that lies instead in a ‘survivor-centred’ politics. Through offering compelling evidence of this politics in practice, I show the ways in which it encourages a different kind of listening and responding to survivors, and in turn a more just approach to justice seeking.

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Keywords

innocence, justice, listening politics, sexual violence, survivor led

On 5 March 2024, the founder of British feminist non-profit Right to Equality unveiled their new affirmative consent campaign, controversially entitled 'I'm Asking for It'. Launched on 'X', it quickly garnered thousands of reactions from feminist researchers, frontline workers and activists (Loulli, 2024). While some supported the campaign, many criticised it, either building on feminist critiques of affirmative consent's assumption of safety (Nash, 2019) or questioning the push to reform the criminal legal system. The campaign's title also drew backlash, with critics calling it 'entirely and irredeemably awful' and warning of its potential harm to survivors whose sexual histories had been, or could be, weaponised against them. Defending the campaign, Right to Equality noted that it was 'deliberately bold and intentionally provocative', created with the intention of sparking debate to change the law, whilst also stating that its focus and slogan had been driven by survivors (Loulli, 2024).

In the days that followed, feminists on the internet struggled over what it meant to listen to survivors of sexual violence. Despite Right to Equality's claims to have been 'led by' survivors, many feminists argued the opposite. Some posted that the organisation was 'refusing to listen' to those who were critical of their campaign. Others suggested that the claim to have engaged survivors while crafting the campaign was exaggerated or even false. Yet, in making these claims little to no attention was given to the fact that a group of survivors did endorse a campaign entitled 'I'm Asking for It'. Their reasons for doing so were instead brushed over, with blame placed on the organisation for (mis)using survivors' words. Naturally there may well be aspects of Right to Equality's methodology that are critiquable. Nonetheless, it is the representational 'led-by' logic, which displaced what could have been an important debate about the ethics of feminist campaigning and justice, that is in greater need of attention.

As this article will contend, the outcry that erupted after the 'I'm Asking for It' launch is indicative of a reflective, kaleidoscopic, *survivor-led politics*, which shapes Anglophone feminist work around sexual violence. A survivor-led politics is understood here as one that is moved to follow, or mirror, survivor wishes without question or critique so that survivors everywhere are better able to 'take back control' (Phipps, 2020: 77–78). While most at home within so-called 'carceral feminist' work, I argue that this politics transcends the seemingly clearcut carceral–anti-carceral binary (Terwiel, 2019). This is because while appearing to produce a multitude of perspectives, like the kaleidoscope, feminism's survivor-led politics only offers slight reworkings of conventional visions; particularly in terms of carcerality. Indeed, while the survivor-led politics is invoked through Right to Equality's claims to have devised their campaign with survivors, it is also observable in the storm that followed, where critics utilised this same politics. Yet while this politics can be mobilised by any ideology, I argue that central to its continued success is a powerful, affective, carceral core narrative: that 'because some survivors say they want carceral outcomes these mustn't be abandoned'. As

such, while the conceptualisation of justice as a kaleidoscope (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018) has gained popularity in recent years, here I instead pause on the risks of utilising this mirror-rooted metaphor and logic.

Far from being contained to British feminist campaign work, this article argues that the survivor-led politics moves through feminism's Anglophone listening public, this being 'an audience oriented to a specific ethics and practice of listening' (Serisier, 2024: 4; see also Lacey, 2013). In making this claim, I draw broadly on feminist work, focusing my analysis on four widely cited qualitative studies that seek to understand justice from survivors' perspectives: (i) Judith Herman's (2005) *Justice From the Victim's Perspective*, (ii) Shirley Jülich's (2006) *Views of Justice*, (iii) Haley Clark's (2015) *A Fair Way to Go* and (iv) Clare McGlynn and Nicole Westmarland's (2018) *Kaleidoscopic Justice*. I focus on these projects because qualitative research on this topic is rare (Mulvihill et al., 2018), and these studies hold significant citational influence both within (Antonsdóttir, 2019; Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017) and beyond the critical feminist academy (Kaba and Hassan, 2019). They thus wield significant citational power and sway across feminism while epitomising the listening politics central to my analysis (Hemmings, 2011). Core to this politics, and in turn these texts, is the perpetuation of a mirror-like 'led-by' logic that makes moving away from a system that is acknowledged as largely unable to provide justice seem impossible. In analysing these texts, I not only pay attention to the political implications of this logic but also undertake an alternative reading of the survivors' words with which they engage.

I begin by illustrating how the survivor-led politics operates across feminism through engagement with these qualitative projects. I then show that this politics travels across Anglophone feminist work that is often depicted as divided, shaping the demands that are made across both sides of the carceral feminist schism. In interrogating why this politics has such a hold on feminist work around the topic of sexual violence and justice, I propose that the affective nature of feminism's testimonial legacies and the discursive formations of the 20th century have produced a wounded innocent figure who makes asking questions of survivor speech both feel and seem impossible. By way of a conclusion I contend that, while a survivor-led politics is incapable of answering the difficult questions of what justice after sexual violence can – and should – be, a survivor-centred one, which asks feminism to reckon with its affective investments and attachments, may instead be.

Feminism's reflective approach to justice

In *Kaleidoscopic Justice*, prior to introducing the words of the 20 survivors interviewed in their study on perceptions of justice, McGlynn and Westmarland (2018) outline the significance of their new conceptual device: the titular kaleidoscope. Extending a large body of feminist work on the topic of justice after sexual violence (see Mulvihill et al., 2018), McGlynn and Westmarland (2018: 185) explain that while it is assumed that survivors seek something concrete, something that can be quantifiably met through outcomes like a prison sentence, 'a sense of justice' for survivors is far less tangible. This is where the metaphor of the kaleidoscope comes in. For much like the kaleidoscope, an optical instrument which when turned seemingly offers its viewers something distinct,

McGlynn and Westmarland (2018: 181) argue that justice for survivors must be understood as a ‘continually shifting pattern [...] constantly refracted through new circumstances, experiences and understandings [...] with multiple beginnings and possible endings [...] and an] on-going and ever-evolving experience’.

Since 2018, the metaphor of the kaleidoscope has been widely recognised as innovative and of foundational importance for feminist thinking around justice (for example, see Antonsdóttir, 2019; Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017). This is in part because of the ways in which it appears to offer an entirely novel conceptualisation of justice that gives voice to a diverse range of survivor experiences. This is not to say that there are not important connections to be made with previous qualitative work on the topic of what justice is to survivors of sexual violence. Much like other widely cited publications, kaleidoscopic justice highlights there to be particular overlapping justice themes for survivors: acknowledgement, validation, belief, consequences, connectedness, accountability, prevention, dignity, respect and very rarely retribution (see also Clark, 2015; Herman, 2005; Jülich, 2006). Nevertheless, McGlynn and Westmarland (2018: 196) stress that, in contrast to previous work, kaleidoscopic justice offers a way of looking ‘beyond an individual case’, thus encompassing ‘broader notions of social justice’. Interestingly, the malleability of the metaphor has meant that it has found praise amongst carceral, anti-carceral and abolitionist feminists both in and outside of the academy. Yet, its success is not simply due to its purported novelty. It is also because of the ways in which the concept is situated within decades of feminist anti-sexual violence work that has sought to challenge the silencing of survivors through the amplification of voice and belief. As McGlynn and Westmarland (2018: 180) explain, ‘one of the reasons why the sexual violence “justice gap” remains is because we have yet to fully understand the justice interests of victim-survivors of sexual violence’.

Feminist work around sexual violence has a long history of being invested in facilitating and listening to survivor testimony and experience, and this is especially true when it comes to the topic of justice. Through early speak-outs and conferences of the 1970s, feminists learnt of the ramifications of a culture that either did not permit survivors to speak about sexual violence or did not listen to those who did. People with experiences of sexual violence have long spoken about these harms prior to second-wave feminism (Phipps, 2016). However, as Tanya Serisier (2018: 4) charts in her formative work on the narrative politics of ‘speaking out’, early consciousness-raising work cemented certain tenets which remain a central part of feminist work around sexual violence. These are that believing and uplifting survivor speech can produce cultural change and justice, all the while assisting in the collective liberation and empowerment of survivors themselves (Serisier, 2018: 6).

Confidence in the power of survivor speech has understandably gone hand in hand with concerns around its constrainability (Naples, 2003). The most prominent position within this work attends to how the judgement, suspicion and disbelief with which survivors are frequently met taints their speech (Gilmore, 2017). A related anxiety is around the risks of mediation or co-option when survivor discourse becomes platformed, such as through academic articles or online feminist campaigns like Right to Equality’s ‘I’m Asking for It’ campaign. As Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray’s (1993: 282) influential

work on the topic illustrates, a core pillar of feminist thought is that the ‘transgressive potential’ of survivor speech is never entirely silenced by those who position themselves as experts, such as TV show hosts or feminist not-for-profits. In this way then, while mediation risks reducing such discourse to the confessional, less intervention is understood as key to facilitating the transformational, *inherently* transgressive, nature of survivor speech. This is a contention that connects with the tenets established by Serisier, whilst also illustrating the feminist conviction in not just including survivor speech but facilitating it in ways that ensure its transgressive quality remains hearable.

These testimonial legacies point to the ways in which feminism’s listening publics are rooted in a politics that considers the belief and reflection of untainted survivor speech to be central to justice (Serisier, 2024). Although there are different approaches to truth and belief – for example, in a legal setting for something to be believed it must be proven – feminist belief is frequently conceptualised more expansively. Standing against approaches which render survivor speech unbelievable and untrustworthy, this orientation to belief challenges the ‘labours of believability’ (Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023: 62–75) through unconditional validation and amplification of survivor speech. Alongside combating the harms that accompany disbelief, enacting belief without question or critique is also to facilitate what Leigh Gilmore (2023) refers to as narrative justice, this being a justice that ‘imagine(s) victims as credible and abusers as accountable’ (Gilmore, 2023: 18). Key to narrative justice, Gilmore (2023: 110) contends, is the enactment of adequate witnessing, described as ‘something better than suspicion’, which avoids ‘deforming [survivor speech] by doubt’ and ‘without substituting different terms of value’ (Gilmore, 2017: 6, 110). In the context of justice then, this type of politics suggests that if a survivor states that a certain outcome will ensure justice, then this must be believed and – wherever possible – facilitated.

Despite the popularity of this listening politics, and seeming usefulness of the metaphorical kaleidoscopic justice, it is worth pausing on the risks of being ‘led by’ survivor speech without question. This is especially pertinent given that the concrete relationship between listening and justice is in fact under-explored (Serisier, 2024). A return to the metaphor of the kaleidoscope is indicative. Made up of mirrors, the kaleidoscope is – in its purest form – a reflective device that emulates: (i) the external world unobstructed, (ii) the world as it is with a series of beads or (iii) a controlled image designed entirely by the manufacturer. When rotated, the reflections within the kaleidoscope move, and seemingly new images form. Nonetheless, although the pattern seen through the viewfinder may change, the process by which the image is created is constant, governed by a fixed arrangement of optical principles. While what is observed through the kaleidoscope is shaped by the device itself, the individual person who directs it and whatever is directly in front of its lens, it is ultimately only able to produce a constrained array of perspectives. Central to the limitations of the kaleidoscope then is its promise of newness but inability to offer an image that is truly new.

Through this reorientation to the kaleidoscope, we can understand that feminism’s reflective listening politics may limit the transgressive quality of survivor speech, all the while restricting conceptualisations of justice. This is because, while mirroring the moving demands of individual survivors’ changing wants, this approach to speech can

only reflect variants of what is already visible. This orientation to survivor discourse is thus unable to offer a justice outside of the ‘individual case’, with ‘multiple beginnings and possible endings’ that are ‘ever-evolving’ (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018: 181). Perhaps more concerning, given that the criminal legal system ‘is so woven into the fabric of society that most of us cannot envision what society would look like otherwise’ (DasGupta, 2003: 16), a kaleidoscopic lens prevents the production of unique ‘ever-evolving’ visions of justice. Instead, it offers variations that play with the centrality of carceral systems but ultimately reinscribe them. As such, while McGlynn and Westmarland (2018: 182) – and all who adopt this listening politics – highlight that survivor ‘understandings of justice were neither driven by, nor reflective of, conventional criminal justice’, they also circulate a powerful *survivor-led* core narrative: that because some survivors seek carcerality, carceral systems must not be truly abandoned.

The kaleidoscopic principles of a survivor-led politics

Two principles are central to the circulation of feminism’s survivor-led politics and its carceral core narrative. While these principles reflect a broader ‘led-by’ listening politics within feminist thought, their appearance in qualitative research reveals how they function in distinct and invisibilised ways. This is particularly striking given that critical feminist work consistently acknowledges the criminal legal system’s systemic failure to deliver justice (ackhurst, 2024). For example, in *Justice from the Victim’s Perspective*, Herman (2005: 583) highlights that only one survivor reported a positive experience with the system – with privileges shaping this outcome: ‘I do sometimes wonder how my experience might have differed if I lacked the benefits of my education, family, community support and a name like “Mary Margaret”’. While underscoring the rarity of such experiences, Herman (2005: 597–599), along with Jülich (2006), Clark (2015) and McGlynn and Westmarland (2018), still conclude that the system must remain. This subtle paradox demonstrates precisely why pinpointing the two survivor-led principles that shape – and often obfuscate – both qualitative research and broader feminist engagements with criminal justice is necessary.

The first principle of feminism’s survivor-led politics is the flattening or erasure of tension between individual survivors’ justice wants. Although this can be observed across all four of the qualitative projects, one example of this is Jülich’s (2006: 132) *Views of Justice* where the reader is introduced to Gina, Rosalind and Celia in quick succession. While Gina is quoted as noting that she ‘feel[s] that people abuse as a result of some underlying problem – this is not solved by imprisonment’, and Celia is clear that ‘the victim doesn’t have a place within the justice system’, Rosalind appears to seek something distinct: ‘the victim should be able to go into the court and say to the judge what they think should happen to the abuser’. Rather than delve into the ways these desires buck up against one another, or the fact that ‘without exception, all survivors [in the study] advocated moving away from the traditional criminal justice model to another forum’ (Jülich, 2006: 132), these tensions are obfuscated. Instead Jülich (2006: 134) invisibilises these disagreements, later gesturing to the importance of improving the criminal legal system through the integration of restorative justice to

meet the varied needs of survivors. In doing so, not only are the paradoxes between survivors' wants reduced – suggesting that the carceral horizon some advocate for can coexist with the belief that sexual violence 'is not solved by imprisonment' (Jülich, 2006: 132) – but the ways in which one survivor's justice desires may conflict with another's are also diminished.

The second and perhaps more significant principle of the survivor-led politics is the reticence to ask critical questions of the words of survivors. This is epitomised with a look to Clark's (2015: 33) *A Fair Way to Go*. As with the other projects, the text reaches the conclusion that 'the criminal justice system was [...] largely disconnected from the victim-survivors' justice needs'. In spite of this, as Clark illustrates, there were also some survivors who appeared to speak about the importance of imprisonment. And for Clark, being 'led by' these voices appears tantamount. To illustrate this point, Clark (2015: 29) includes the words of Danielle:

once it was finalised I found out that he had to go to jail and I remember feeling elated ... I thought ... he will be punished. He will be put away and his life will have repercussions because of this from now on. So yeah, there was some good in it.

There are undeniably a variety of interpretations to this sentence, however Danielle's words float largely uninterrogated in the text. The implication is that their meaning is both apparent and obvious: that Danielle seeks, and supports, the imprisonment of those who have abused them. What makes this suggestion all the more disorientating is that Clark acknowledges that survivor conceptualisations of justice are shaped by the omnipresence of the criminal legal system in justice discourse; exemplified by one survivor called Mandy: '[i]t's very hard to think outside the system when the system is what you've got' (Clark, 2015: 33). Despite agreeing with Mandy's point, when it comes to engaging with survivors Clark – like McGlynn and Westmarland, Jülich and Herman – refrains from asking why the survivors in her study said they wanted to involve the criminal legal system. Not only this but in uncritically repeating survivors' words, under the auspice of being 'led by' them, the potential that an erasure of nuance has occurred is also invisibilised; a potential distortion which echoes the ways in which the kaleidoscope often alters that which it reflects. The result is that the 'survivor-led' carceral core narrative is both cemented and again concealed.

Disagreements about the role of the criminal legal system have long plagued feminist anti-violence work (see Terwiel, 2019). Nonetheless, as the reflective 'led-by' logic on both sides of the Right to Equality debacle points to, despite appearing increasingly binarised, the two sides of the sex wars of the #MeToo era (Bracewell, 2021) instead frequently function as one distorted kaleidoscope. On one side are those who are critical of the criminal legal system but do not believe in its abolition, and who argue that – like both Right to Equality and the four projects traced thus far – feminism must continue to reform the criminal legal system because some survivors seek it, and because all survivors deserve to be listened to. Within this body of work the reflective principles of the 'led-by' politics and its carceral core narrative are most evident. For, as the Right to Equality debate points to, this type of feminism frequently struggles to pay attention to

the complexity of seemingly carceral survivor speech, and in doing so argues that listening to survivors is keeping the criminal legal system on the ‘menu of options’ (Daly and Bouhours, 2011: 26). The reticence to engage with the inherent incompatibility between the justice needs of those who seemingly seek punishment, and those who are harmed by systems that punish, is also painfully apparent.

While seemingly distinct, the warped reflection of this ‘led-by’ argument can be found in the demands of those who, like many of the critics of Right to Equality, are overtly anti-carceral. Often drawing on US-based feminist abolitionist group INCITE!’s (2003) contention that ‘the question is not, should [survivors] call the police. The questions are, why is it that [this is survivors’] only option, and can we provide other options that will keep [them] truly safe?, this branch of feminism suggests that while there are some survivors who seek punishment, the focus must instead be on developing solutions that echo those who experience the harms of the criminal legal system (for example, see Gruber, 2020: 16). While it is important to redefine the centre through engagement with those most marginalised, this approach to survivor voice risks slipping into a feminist politics that is ‘led by’ survivors, without problematising their speech, all the while skirting over the complexity of the demands of survivors who appear to seek carceral outcomes. One example of this is an article entitled ‘No One Is Disposable’, which after charting the importance of prison abolition goes on to consider what happens when marginalised survivors may turn to carceral systems (Barrie, 2020: 71, 90). Instead of exploring why this may be, the author notes that, ‘for now, we need to work both within the system and outside it, improving the options currently available for justice while expanding non-carceral approaches to harm and working towards prison abolition’ (Barrie, 2020: 91). This is despite the fact that, as the author themselves gestures towards, marginalised survivors may well have their own complicated carceral attachments (Lovelace, 2020), even if given space to imagine freely what they may want (ackhurst, 2024).

Although concerns around the carceral co-option of the feminist agenda have only increased in volume in recent years (Sullivan, 2022), this analysis highlights the existence of a shared survivor-led politics across both sides of the carceral divide. Central to the arguments of both carceral and anti-carceral feminists are the same kaleidoscopic principles outlined with reference to the four projects. In adhering to a survivor-led politics, both sides also make assumptions about the transgressive nature of survivor speech when in fact, as Serisier (2018: 213) argues, while ‘survivor speech is always potentially transgressive [...] it does not always enact this potential’. Thus, while appearing to produce a multitude of perspectives, like the kaleidoscope, this work instead often offers only slight reworkings of conventional visions, particularly in terms of carcerality.

Affective testimonial legacies

To understand why this large and politically disparate body of feminist work continues to circulate a survivor-led carceral core narrative, a return to Serisier is useful, namely her claims about the affective nature of feminist belief. Through examining the narrative politics of #BelieveAllWomen, Serisier (2023) explores how belief is not passive; a claim supported by Banet-Weiser and Higgins’ (2023) contention that believability is

affectively felt. Instead, as these authors illustrate, belief involves the construction of credibility whereby feminist listeners may ignore their preconceptions through focusing on ‘the affective or subjective truth of the narrator’ (Serisier, 2023: 347). This has only been amplified by the fact that – as Lilile Chouliaraki (2021: 12) illustrates – the 20th century saw the rise of the grand narratives of psychoanalysis and human rights and production of an ‘affective structure of communication’. This has – Chouliaraki contends with reference to feminist campaigns such as #IBelieveHer – ‘gradually established empathy as a primary emotion of the liberal polity’, meaning that when suffering is expressed, responding in ways that extend critique feel less permissible. Here, belief ‘becomes a kind of ‘identity work’, constructing the reader or listener as a certain type of person’ (Serisier, 2023: 347): the type of feminist who believes all women and survivors unconditionally so as to better empathise with them, without fully grappling with what deep empathy necessitates. For, to believe unquestionably, and thus represent survivors’ speech in a way that illustrates this, is to maintain and perform the role of a good feminist listener who cares for – and empathises with – survivors.

Undergirding the claims made by both Chouliaraki and Serisier is a broader point about how ‘the survivor’ has become discursively central to contemporary politics; and in particular in social movements like feminism. In tracing the genealogy of ‘the survivor’, Shanice Orgad (2009: 137) charts the shifts from investments in victimhood to survivorhood across five public cultures, these being: the Holocaust, psychotherapy, reality TV, discourses of health and illness and feminist discourses of childhood sexual abuse (see also Cole, 2021). Through these discourses, where victimhood was increasingly understood ‘to condemn the character of sufferers irrespective of their condition and to chastise them for enfeebling and effeminizing the nation’ (Cole, 2021: 33), survivorhood and thus ‘the survivor’ emerged as something one becomes through healing and heroicism (Orgad, 2009: 150; see also Serisier, 2018: 50–57). It is because of this that, in a comparable way to Chouliaraki, Orgad (2009: 143, 150) contends that the suffering and pain of survivors has increasingly come to be ‘at the heart and forefront of an urgent political project’ that ‘promotes the survivor as a legitimate, desirable and truthful mode of being’.

Although ‘the survivor’ has moved through feminism discursively for decades, I propose that central to the affective force of feminism’s survivor-led politics is a subtly distinct figure: the *figure of the wounded survivor*. Where Orgad’s (2009) ‘survivor’ is excised of suffering and pain, the figure of the wounded survivor instead operates within feminism’s kaleidoscopic listening politics as an archetype of an innocent and irrevocably wounded female survivor, who has been indelibly marked by the scars of her trauma forever but whose healing remains deeply desired (ackhurst, 2024). This is not to say that this figure is a ‘stereotype’ of a survivor of sexual violence. As Sita Balani (2023: 112) notes – through engagement with Jaspir Puar and Amit Rai’s (2002) work on the figure of the terrorist – ‘figures are something closer to myths, sharing the same haunting structure of the primordially, rather than merely the expected or clichéd’. While the figures that Balani, Puar and Rai explore are configured as monstrous through Western discourses of normality, the figure of the wounded survivor is normalised within feminist discourses. Central to this process of normalisation are the testimonial legacies traced

above, which have furnished the figure of the wounded survivor with heavy affective value through their continuous circulation of a largely individualised, gendered, sexual violence trauma narrative. This is a process which can be best understood through Sara Ahmed's (2014: 45) work on affective economies, where emotions operate as a form of capital. The more certain signs, symbols, objects or bodies (such as the figure of the wounded survivor) circulate through narratives and discourses (such as the trauma narrative), the more emotion is generated due to the ways in which 'repression always leaves its trace in the present'; the result being that some figures become more affective than others.

Writing on feminism's relationship to woundedness has hitherto largely focused on exposing the resentment that an overinvestment in pain and injury has produced (Brown, 1995). I suggest that the affective work of a survivor-led politics exists insidiously alongside – and at times in place of – this investment. As feminism's reflective, belief-driven, led-by listening politics interacts with the emotional force of the figure of the wounded survivor, innocent survivors everywhere become constructed as inherently believable and unquestionable because of all they have survived. This in turn imbues this figure and the survivors who embody her with what Jackie Wang (2018: 260–295) refers to as a 'politics of innocence'; a politics grounded in an 'empathetic structure of feeling', that demands that the needs of those who are conceptualised as innocent are met over those of others and above all else. There are of course some feminists who are solely motivated by what Wendy Brown (1995) refers to as an attachment to a wounded identity, which produces a will to power due to a desire to overcome said woundedness, and in turn leads to investments in projects that fail them. As Alison Phipps (2016) has charted, one outcome of this is that some feminists ventriloquise survivors to further certain harmful political agendas; whether carceral, transphobic or anti-sex work. Indeed, this was the claim levied against Right to Equality by their critics, that their (mis)use of survivor voices was driven by their own desire to reform a harmful criminal legal system. Others still construct 'a damaged "other" as a justification for [their] own interventionist impulses' (Doezema, 2001: 16). The *survivor-led feminist politics* I have outlined here operates in conjunction with this politic, whilst also affecting a far broader feminist listening public due to the continuous circulation of the affective figure of the wounded survivor. Not only this, but this figure inscribes an approach to belief that is largely unable to respond to the *wounded survivor* differently because of the trauma she has endured, her innocence, the urge to be a good feminist listener and also because of the desperate belief that being led by survivors will produce the healing that so many long for.

It is through this lens that we can understand the hold of the survivor-led politics which – while at times driven by resentment – also endeavours to combat the injustice that the figure of the wounded survivor has experienced by striving to give innocent survivors whatever they appear to want. As Chouliaraki gestures towards, one result of a politics rooted in this kind of emotional capitalism is that survivors of sexual violence are positioned as warranting unquestionable belief without critique *because* they are survivors, which in turn makes asking important critical questions of their speech feel impossible. Significantly, however, this politics does not merely shape listening. As I will now show,

it is also an epistemological orientation, altering how the knowledge and experience of survivors is both included and interpreted. In this way then, not only does the survivor-led politics display an affective reflective logic but – to return to the metaphor of the kaleidoscope – this reflection is frequently seen through a prism of the figure of the wounded survivor, a prism which has significant risks for the feminist anti-violence justice project.

The risks of an entangled politics of belief and innocence

In *States of Injury*, Brown (1995) warns that an uncritical reliance on woundedness can give rise to authoritarian politics, as those who take up this wounded identity may in fact cast ‘the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters’ (Brown, 1995: 27). I propose that Brown’s analysis points to a further issue with wounded attachments, and thus the risks of engaging with survivor words through the prism of the figure of the wounded survivor. This is the interpretative consequences of enacting what Anastasia Chamberlen and Henrique Carvalho (2022: 93) refer to as a ‘hostile solidarity’ on behalf of wounded figures. This being a type of solidarity connected to empathy, that seeks punishment due to the ‘prism of injustice’, and advances ‘an image of community in which individuals are bonded together through their vulnerability against crime and their antagonism towards criminals’. As Chamberlen and Carvalho (2022) illustrate, central to the shift from pain to punitivity is the ways in which solidarity undergirds this hostility. For while pain can produce hostility, the mutation from pain to a collective urge to punish occurs when hostility is rooted in solidarity.

A look to one section of *A Fair Way to Go* (Clark, 2015: 25) is useful in illustrating how this hostile solidarity on behalf of the figure of the wounded survivor plays out epistemologically. Here, under a section titled ‘accountability and responsibility’, Clark notes that ‘the system procedures were at odds with promoting perpetrator accountability and responsibility’, which is closely followed by the paradoxical frame that ‘participants believed that the justice system ought to play an active role in holding perpetrators to account for the crimes they had committed’. To support this assertion, the words of two survivors are used: Olivia and Lance. The first referenced survivor, Olivia, is quoted as stating ‘I guess it [justice] would be going to court and making him accountable for what he’s done would be the justice’. For Clark, believing Olivia, a survivor who embodies the figure of the wounded survivor, is to agree with what her words seem to say: that justice is the court system, and this system will facilitate accountability for Olivia.

Nonetheless, while Olivia’s statement may well indicate a desire for an active role in the criminal legal system, the use of ‘I guess’ may well be a minimiser, a marker of hesitation, a reluctant acceptance. Moreover, the sentence structure indicates that what is important to Olivia is not the court process but accountability. This does not necessarily mean that Olivia wants the court process to play an active role; it may simply mean she cannot imagine an alternative forum for public accountability, thus making the courts the best she can hope for. This is a fact which, as already discussed, Clark is well aware of. Yet, Clark not only refrains from asking why Olivia seeks accountability through courts but her interpretation of Olivia’s words can be argued to move through the prism of the

figure of the wounded survivor and a hostile solidarity with this figure. Indeed, at various points, Clark (2015: 19) highlights the persistent injustice faced by survivors despite 'decades of reform efforts'. Her subsequent acknowledgement that 'women are blamed for their own sexual violence' shortly after her analysis of Olivia's words also reinforces a sense of collective feminist experience, seeming to motivate the demand for accountability and responsibility through punishment (Clark, 2015: 26). As she notes, it is because women are blamed that it remains essential 'for criminal justice system officials to make perpetrators answerable for their behaviour'. Thus, I propose that instead of interrogating Olivia's words, they are presented to suggest that she wants the criminal legal system to play an active role in holding those who cause sexual violence to account because of a deeper, more hostile kind of solidarity that is akin to that which is conceptualised by Chamberlen and Carvalho (2022).

The second survivor, Lance, is referenced as saying:

then hopefully [the perpetrator will go] through a program and realise the consequences and go, 'right I fucking do deserve to do jail time for what I've done', you know, and realise what they've done and realise how much they've fucked up people's lives.

Again, believing Lance's words without question is to agree that jail time can produce consequences. And evidently, that is what he appears to say. However, while Lance may well want the justice system to play an *active* role in attaining accountability, it is also plausible to read Lance as someone who simply wants *something* 'active' to happen. By this I mean he may simply want there to be some mechanism for the perpetrator to come to terms with having caused harm. As such, an important re-read of Lance's quotation is that, like Olivia, he may have no other options, and thus holds onto this system as the only avenue for prevention; even though what he actually names as wanting is some form of programme that need not relate to the criminal legal system. There is a significant difference between saying you want someone to realise that they deserve to go to jail and saying you want someone to go to jail. Lance may want the latter, but what he has emphasised is the former. Nevertheless, this tension is not only erased and ignored but Clark also seems pulled towards an analysis that I suggest is shaped by hostile solidarity.

This example points to the ethical questions and limitations of a survivor-led politics that is moved by both belief and innocence, and which also interprets justice through the prism of the affective figure of the wounded survivor. Moreover, it highlights how this politics may move those who engage with the words of survivors towards punitivity that they otherwise critique. There are however further broader ramifications, for not only are certain bodies more likely to be perceived as wounded, innocent and in turn less possible to critique, but so too are others less able to embody this figure. The 'selective empathies' that this risks producing for 'less innocent' survivors are manifold (Phipps, 2016). Not only this but as Chouliaraki (2021: 14) speaks to, there are significant risks of this kind of politics leaving feminism, and becoming adopted by those who seek to abuse those with less power. In this vein, while denying survivors an adequate witness must be challenged in the pursuit of justice, it is also evident that the affective urge to

believe survivors in ways that are so bound to innocence is also incapable of answering broader questions of survivor and societal justice.

From a politics that is led by, to one that instead centres

What does it mean to believe survivors like Olivia and Lance – or those who agreed with Right to Equality’s ‘I’m Asking for It’ campaign – whilst also asking critical questions of their speech? As this article has illustrated, doing so involves grappling with the deeply enmeshed affective notions of belief and innocence. Haunted by the decades of injustice that the figure of the wounded survivor has endured, the importance of countering institutions and practices that taint survivor speech presses on the emotional registers of many feminists. One result of this is that, when individual survivors say they seek incarceration – as Olivia and Lance appear to – feminist listening becomes synonymous with a refusal to turn away from the criminal legal system. Not only this, but the force of feminism’s wounded figure may also produce more hostile interpretations of their words, leading to an over-amplification of the certainty with which survivors want carceral outcomes. This is despite the varying ways that many feminists working in and around sexual violence recognise that this system cannot provide the majority of survivors with justice.

Nevertheless, reorientating to belief and innocence so that questions can be asked of both survivor speech and also of the politics that makes reckoning with it so painful is essential. As Wang (2018: 64) explores, while work rooted in an empathetic identification and frameworks of innocence can sometimes be strategically useful, ‘these strategies become problematic when they reinforce a framework that renders revolutionary and insurgent politics unimaginable’. To engage with survivor speech in different ways, in ways that counter a politics of innocence, may *feel* impossible. For to do so appears to stand in direct contrast with feminist work that is profoundly invested in innocence and which seeks to break the silence and, in turn, end the violence by circulating survivor speech without critique. But I propose that doing otherwise risks further entrenching a core narrative that is unable to produce a more wide-ranging, less individualistic approach to justice.

Significantly, as Edinburgh Rape Crisis’ (ERCC, 2023) *What Does Justice Mean to You?* workbook illustrates, a different type of justice politics is possible. Here, across 24 beautifully illustrated pages, frontline workers and survivors are encouraged to centre justice fantasies, all the while reframing them as justice goals. Similarly to the four projects this article has used to explore feminism’s survivor-led politics, the workbook cites the survivors who supported its creation as stating ‘I want them to be locked away forever’ and ‘I wish they were dead’ (ERCC, 2023: 10). However, in a marked departure from the four academic works, the ERCC (2023: 10) workbook is clear that ‘fantasies about justice might not be realistic, but they can reveal what really matters’. ERCC thus encourage a reframing of these fantasies as goals of safety, closure and protection. In doing so, they suggest that those who encounter such fantasies avoid being ‘led by’ their apparent meaning, and instead pull out ‘what really matters’. ERCC’s approach to listening thus recognises the pain and suffering that these survivors have experienced,

whilst also fostering a shift away from the immovability that plagues the survivor-led politics and its core narrative.


Firstly, central to what we might call a *survivor-centred politics* is a different approach to belief and innocence than currently operates within feminism's listening publics' survivor-led politics (see also Creative Interventions, 2020). Writing about the relationship between feminist listening practices and what she terms 'just hearing', Serisier (2024: 13) contends that belief does not in fact get us closer to justice. Further still, she suggests that listening justly, so providing survivors with some kind of 'narrative justice' that 'adequately witnesses' (Gilmore, 2023: 110), may only be a precondition to justice rather than justice itself. When ERCC ask readers of its workbook to centre survivor desires but also explore how the criminal legal system cannot facilitate protection, safety or closure, they echo and also extend Serisier's contention in two ways. In doing so, they also highlight the potential and possibility of a survivor-centred politics. The first way in which a survivor-centred politics is observable is through ERCC's encouragement of a feminism that listens justly and ethically, but which also recognises that listening to survivors is also work: work which necessitates understanding the ways in which survivor discourse is not in fact inherently transgressive, but influenced by more powerful discourses (Serisier, 2018: 213). Or to put this another way, listening justly to a survivor who says, as Olivia does, that justice 'would be going to court and making him accountable for what he's done' may necessitate hearing the need for accountability, whilst also recognising that the apparent fantasy for incarceration may have more to do with the normalisation of legal discourses than it does with an actual desire for punishment.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the survivor-centred politics visible in the ERCC workbook asks feminists to respond differently to survivors and their speech, and also to utilise what Serisier (2024) calls 'political listening'. Central to this is a refusal to accept that engaging with carceral systems – widely recognised as sites of injustice, especially for those with intersecting marginalisations – is the best we can hope for. This political response recognises that there is a difference between listening to survivors' experiences of violence and acting on what they say justice is to them, especially when their justice fantasies risk causing further harm and violence. To return to Olivia's claim, in contrast to Clark's interpretation of her words, a survivor-centred politics may instead respond by exploring other avenues to obtain accountability. Or by even reflecting on how, while accountability may not always be possible due to the sheer injustice that is sexual violence (ackhurst, 2024), this does not mean that those who cause sexual harm should be incarcerated. The workbook, and in turn a feminist politics that centres survivor speech rather than being 'led by' it, thus demands feminists not only listen but also respond in ways that move away from solely focusing on what we owe individual survivors who speak, and thus step into disagreement with those who seek to punish, incarcerate and cause violence.

It is worth stressing that the work of a survivor-centred politics carries with it difficulties and discomfort, and will necessitate that some feminists 'labour to relinquish power' (Serisier, 2024: 15). This politics also requires reckoning with deeply rooted affective legacies and the wounded figure that this article has traced, and the entangled ways in which belief and innocence operate within feminism. As I have argued, it is only in

doing so that the kaleidoscopic principles of feminism's survivor-led politics can be shifted away from. For as Serisier (2023: 352) has noted, 'bearing witness may sometimes entail a grappling with the systemic nature of injustice and a lack of easy or simple solutions'. In a time where survivor speech is increasingly mobilised for reactionary carceral politics, finding a way to hold the truth of the words of survivors, as well as that which is possible to reinterpret or ask questions of, has never been more essential.

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