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In the Texture of Things: Collage as a Site of Material Constraint and Possibility

molly rosabelle ackhurst

School of Law and Criminology, Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich, London SE10 9LS, UK; m.r.ackhurst@gre.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores the affective and material complexities of creating arts-based artefacts to explore and represent sexual violence. It does so through attending to both the materials used and the embodied practices of those making them. Focusing on collage, it examines how the physical properties of materials mediate what can be imagined, simultaneously enabling expression and constraining it within familiar visual vocabularies often shaped by state, security, and punitive logics. I argue that materiality operates not only through objects but through the bodies, gestures, and decisions of makers, shaping what can be imagined. Through engagement with Nancy Naples' (2003) formative work on survivor discourse alongside novel empirical data and cultural texts, the article makes the subtle yet significant contention that attending to these entangled materialities—of both maker and medium—reveals how friction between imaginative intent and material affordances can generate methodological insights, open alternative futures, and disrupt dominant discourses.

Keywords: collage; sexual violence; feminist politics; sorry baby; feminist materialism

1. Epilogue

The film begins and we see Agnes, dressed only in pyjamas, run out of the glowing house into the Baltic-looking night. 'Oh my god HI' she screams, grabbing Lydie in a sharp embrace. Moments later we see Agnes and Lydie again, sitting on a camel-coloured sofa facing one another, a striped blanket thrown over them, Lydie's hair in a silk blue bonnet, laughing over the ridiculousness and deepness of the phrase men sometimes say in sex. '*You* like *that*', which Agnes and Lydie realise, through cackles and re-enactments, means—when said by the various men they have slept with in the past—*you* like my *dick* (Victor 2025).

> Axle stared at the riso scraps she'd taken from her one of her jobs, her voice uncertain. 'The bright, like really bright, pink, bright yellow. . .had quite a sense of brightness. . . or a sense of optimism through those colours'. Then her words slowed. 'But then as I was picking it up I turned it over and there was lots of reds. Almost quite blood, blood-like. . .That's when. . . my tone shifted because of the severity of it'. Axle paused. 'That's probably where my, my anger has come from'.

We do not see the moment in which Agnes is assaulted. Instead, we learn about it through her conversation with Lydie. 'What happened' Lydie asks a dishevelled Agnes, whose laces are still untied, to which Agnes replies 'I don't know'. But Agnes does remember. Flash to Agnes sitting, wet-haired in the bath, as she tells Lydie how 'I felt

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something go in, like in me, and my spine got cold'. 'That sounds like. . .that is the thing' Lydie replies. Flash to Agnes and Lydie in a doctor's office where they both tear into the medical professionals' use of medical and legal discourses. 'I wouldn't call him my attacker' Agnes says. Flash to Agnes staring at the shoes she wore the night the assault took place. Flash to Agnes picking up a kitten on her way to get coffee. Flash to Agnes a year in the future, as she is excused from voir dire after she tells the judge and lawyer that, yes, she has technically been the 'victim of a crime' but that she did not report what happened to her because not only does 'he have a kid' but 'I want him to stop being someone who does that, and if he went to jail, he'd just be a guy who does that, who is now in jail'. Flash to Agnes learning how to get her breath back after a panic attack, and then eating a sandwich on the floor. Flash to Agnes—living in the same house she lived in when the assault took place, now a professor having filled her assaulters tenured position—years later, staring at Lydie's new baby as she says 'I'm sorry that bad things are going to happen to you. I hope they don't. . .But, sometimes, bad stuff just happens. That's why I feel bad for you in a way. That you're alive, and you don't know that yet. But I can still listen, and not be scared. So that's good, or that's something, at least' (Victor 2025).

> Sierra took a big breath in as she drew wildlife in an imagined future, sunsets, and 'living life at the flow of streams'. Crayon-lines create an image 'like [a] kids drawing' – where damage could be entirely erased with colour.
> But. 'He stole some of my soul'.
> 'I have to deal with the consequences'.
> 'I deserve it'.
> 'Him gone'.
> The crayon created future – she explained – could only begin when 'he actually goes to prison'.

2. Introduction

To make art in the aftermath of sexual violence is to enter into a set of relations between bodies, tools, objects, and discourses. When a hand reaches for riso scraps, or when a crayon is pressed to paper—as occurred in both Axle and Sierra's interviews with me back in 2022, described in this article's epigraph—what unfolds is not simply expression, but a mediated process whereby matter and maker shape one another. In examining the ways in which these relations scaffold what is made, this article interrogates how the process of making collages about sexual violence shapes what can be imagined and thus created. This intervention is significant because while collage has long been understood within art therapy and feminist practice as a generative and affective medium for working through trauma, less attention has been paid to how the specific material and discursive conditions of its production actively delimit as well as enable expression. In attending to this gap, this article proposes that the material context in which feminists and survivors make art about sexual violence, and more specifically the material processes of collage-making, shapes not only what can be said but what can be imagined.

In making this claim this article draws on art made by two participants, Axle and Sierra, as part of novel research with twenty-three frontline sexual violence support workers and four individuals with experiences of homelessness. As part of the research, participants were invited to produce a collage in response to the prompt 'What impossible or possible things do you want to happen after sexual violence?' The project was underpinned by the question of why contemporary feminist anti-violence work and politics remain attached to carceral systems, structures and logics despite knowing and experiencing the ways in which these approaches largely do not facilitate justice for survivors of sexual violence.

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Although collage-as-method had not previously been used in research on sexual violence and justice, with work largely focused on eliciting spoken understandings, collage-making has become increasingly prominent in feminist qualitative scholarship since Butler-Kisber's (2007, 2010) pioneering work in the early 2000s, including a few studies on sexual violence (for example, see Treffry-Goatley et al. 2018). This is largely due to the ways in which creative methods like collage can at times better enable research participants to speak about sensitive topics in ways that are 'less intrusive' whilst also giving rise to 'new discoveries' (Vacchelli 2018, p. 186). While collage-as-method was used in this research in part due to these reasons, a further rationale for using collage was to explore whether the method is able to facilitate different types of knowledge around justice after sexual violence by disrupting conventional narratives and attachments that are less likely to be foregrounded in conventional explanations. This approach thus marks an extension of methodological approaches within this field and opens up alternative ways of apprehending how justice is imagined, felt, and articulated.

Alongside these interviews, I engage with Victor's (2025) film *Sorry Baby*, also explored within the epigraph, which I read as a temporal and digital collage that illuminates how fragmentation, sequencing, and editing constitute material processes with political stakes. Not only this, but I suggest that the broader process of art-making undertaken by Victor, which included discussions with other survivors and a desire to challenge dominant discourses, is also of note. As I suggest, Victor's *process* of cinematic collage-making allows for a different kind of justice to be explored, which, as the epigraph points out, is distinct from that articulated by Axle and Sierra. In undertaking this analysis I thus make a clear distinction between materials and both matter and materiality. By materials, I refer to the tangible substances used in art-making such as paper, riso ink, crayon wax, glue, and digital editing interfaces. These substances possess specific physical properties that afford and resist particular gestures. By materiality, however, I refer to the broader relational field and specific processes through which materials, bodies, histories, discourses and affects become entangled. As such while matter and materials may appear synonymous, the former is not reducible to the finished artefact and it instead encompasses the embodied *process* of art-making. Process, in this sense, is not external to matter but one of the ways matter becomes active in shaping imagination.

The intervention made here speaks to three overlapping bodies of scholarship: first, debates within feminist scholarship about the representation of sexual violence and the saturation of trauma discourse (for example, see Mardorossian 2002; Gavey and Schmidt 2011; Horeck 2013; Serisier 2018; Ross 2022); second, scholarship on collage as a historically disruptive form associated with rupture, destruction, and reassembly (Banash 2013); and third, art-therapeutic understandings of collage as both a transformative and reparative practice (Butler-Kisber 2007; Vacchelli 2018; Talwar 2019). By bringing these studies together, I propose that collage-making about sexual violence is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently constrained. Rather, it is a site of tension in which imaginative possibility is negotiated, an argument that has methodological consequences for arts-based research and political consequences for feminist anti-rape praxis. The contribution of this article is therefore not simply to demonstrate that materials are non-neutral, but to show that the processual materiality of collage can reproduce discursive frameworks such as the trauma discourse even as it seeks to unsettle it. At the same time, under particular conditions, as I suggest through my reading of *Sorry Baby*, collage practices can redirect attention away from punitive closure and towards alternative forms of justice. In this vein I argue that, given that imagination is materially mediated, attending carefully to *process* becomes essential for any feminist project that seeks to envision futures beyond carceral inevitability.

3. Representing Sexual Violence

Much has been written about the difficulties of representing the aftermath of sexual violence (for example, see, Higgins and Silver 1991; Horeck 2013). From Scarry's (1985) foundational account of pain as that which resists language to Alcoff and Gray's (1993) analysis of the cultural and institutional pressures placed on survivors to "speak," "confess," or render their experiences legible to experts and mass media, this ever-growing body of work is animated by a shared central concern: what is required to depict the awfulness of sexual violence without distorting or diminishing it? This anxiety is intensified by three interrelated problems. First, there is the awareness of the ways in which the trauma of sexual violence can 'shatter(s) the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others' (Herman 2015, p. 51), which risks inflicting not only silencing but 'robbing its victims of wordlessness' (Princenthal 2022, p. 13). This can make truly eliciting the awfulness of sexual violence challenging, which is only compounded by external forces: the judgement, suspicion, and routine disbelief with which survivors are met. As Gilmore (2017) argues, such scepticism not only taints survivors' speech but actively shapes the conditions under which their testimony can be recognised and received. Finally there is the fact that, due to what Plummer (2002, pp. 78–79) refers to as the 'overload of stories' about sexual violence from the 1980s onwards, where tales of sexual violence were previously scarce, now 'such stories are everywhere'. While one reward of this mainstreaming is that the prevalence of sexual violence may be easier to acknowledge, it also risks the production of a cultural fascination with 'the sexually violated body, bruised and beaten, dead or alive' (Bumiller 2009, p. 22). This type of representation cements a script whereby violence becomes the norm, rape is assumed to be inevitable at the 'beginning, middle, and end of any interaction' (Marcus 1992, p. 391), and women are inherently wounded and vulnerable, which, in thinking with Bumiller (2009, p. 35), also has 'a powerful influence over how the law is mobilised to protect victims and punish perpetrators'.

Feminist work has long been aware of these difficulties, and it is arguably because of this awareness that since the earliest days of the women's liberation movement, platforms and practices that enabled survivors to speak in and publicise their own words have been both centred and prioritised. The most well documented of these is the written memoir which, as Serisier's (2018) work on the narrative politics of "speaking out" points to, includes not only more traditional printed press publications—which were a core part of the memoir boom (Rak 2013)—but more recent online platforms such as Twitter, a branch of the genre that experienced its own respective boom after #MeToo in 2017 (Gilmore 2023). Speaking through art-making has also been a central practice for survivors. Indeed, for Princenthal (2022, p. 13), finding ways to "talk" about experiences of rape and assault through art is a more radical and useful way of speaking: 'the body's language, when spoken by women, was singularly free of that patriarchal influence then just coming to be understood as shaping verbal exchange'. Princenthal (2022, p. 151) makes this claim through engagement with the work of pioneering women artists of the 1970s—such as Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, Aviva Rahmani's *Ablutions* and Nancy Spero's *Torture of Women*—which, as she claims, allowed artists like Spero to 'rewrite the script for visualisations of rape' as well as provoke attention that helps 'conceive a safer world'. For Princenthal then, art-making is an even more vital tool for survivors to speak. It is perhaps because of this that some like Doherty (2020) have argued that this kind of art must be understood as producing an expressive kind of justice, which must be understood of as part of the kaleidoscope survivors (McGlynn and Westmarland 2018) access in the process of surviving.

Collage occupies a distinctive place in this body of work and also within feminist art history and therapeutic practice. Although long side-lined as a hobby for women,

children and folk people, since being taken up by the likes of Picasso in the early 20th century, it has become a central artistic medium mobilised in response to violence, war, and social upheaval. Within feminist art of the 1970s, collage and montage were used to expose the constructed nature of gendered representation and to reassemble the female body outside patriarchal coherence (Princenthal 2022). Artists such as Hannah Höch and later feminist practitioners demonstrated how cutting and recombination could interrupt dominant visual regimes rather than merely reproduce them (Elliott et al. 2019). Within the feminist therapeutic context, collage has also often been understood as uniquely suited to trauma work because it allows for indirect expression, symbolic substitution, and the safe externalisation of affect (Vacchelli 2018). This is because it is frequently suggested that they act of selecting, cutting, and arranging fragments can provide structure where memory feels chaotic, and control where experience has involved violation.

In spite of the seemingly liberatory nature of artistic representations of sexual violence, the assumption that creative speech acts such as collage-making are inherently disruptive is worth interrogating. As Princenthal herself reflects, there have been shifts in the types of artistic practices utilised by survivors and feminists alike in their depictions of sexual violence and its aftermath. For Princenthal (2022, p. 259), while there have been successes due to such art-making, there have also been limitations, and she concludes *Unspeakable Acts* with a call for contemporary feminist/survivor artists to 'make just the kind of work pioneered by artists in the seventies and extended in its wake: an art that is unyielding in its truth to unspeakable experience'. Regarding collage specifically, the method's fragmentation, stickiness, and layering also risks mirroring the constraints already available to both feminists and survivors. Miriam Schapiro's work around *femmage*, which foregrounded domestic craft, assemblage, and gendered labour as sites of feminist reclamation, further complicates the assumption of neutrality. While *femmage* sought to elevate materials historically coded as feminine and marginal, it also reminds us that materials arrive saturated with social meaning. To cut and glue is therefore deeply entangled with histories of domesticity, care, repetition, and gendered expectation. These histories travel into contemporary arts-based research whether acknowledged or not.

Yet where Princenthal (2022) appears to suggest the art's limitations lie with individual art-makers, I turn to the material and discursive conditions through which sexual violence is spoken about. Naples' (2003, p. 1152) decisive work *Deconstructing and Locating Survivor Discourse* is instructive here, highlighting the ways in which seemingly liberatory practices are frequently constrained because of how the 'social and institutional locations. . .through which survivor discourse is generated' shape both speech and listening or, to put this differently, because of the ways in which the material and cultural weave their way through the transformative potential of even the most apparently liberatory of practices are never guaranteed. For Naples then, matter matters. Not only this, but so too do the customs, traditions, and processes through which such matter is generated, as well as the assumptions we make, and carry with us, when deploying these praxes. As such, not only does matter and the generation of such matter matter, but, as postcolonial materialist work has long shown (Spivak 2015), so too do the material conditions through which subjects are formed. It is because of this that—as Serisier (2018) has eloquently illustrated—speaking out in all its forms is simultaneously constrained and liberating, enabling yet also delimiting what can be said and how it can be heard. This applies even more so when that speech is rooted in a creative practices like memoir writing or art-making, such as the utilisation of collage.

4. Riso, Crayon, and the Affective Mediation of Justice

The ways in which the materiality of the collage-making process mediates what can be expressed can be seen with a look to the analysis of my interview with Axle and the

affective power of the riso scraps they used. As with each of the twenty-three frontline sexual violence support workers and four homeless survivors I interviewed, Axle, a white cis female heterosexual Australian frontline sexual violence support worker based in Scotland, created a vibrant image in response to the instruction to create a collage depicting 'any, or all, of the things you want to happen after sexual violence, and what this would look like'—from the likely to the unlikely, the seemingly possible to the impossible'. Nevertheless, as I have explored elsewhere, 'the collages created by those I interviewed were far removed from the manicured carceral-free utopias I had optimistically envisioned. . .[i]nstead I found that despite acknowledging the inadequacy of the criminal legal system, those I interviewed were cyclically pulled back towards it' (ackhurst 2024, p. 90). For Axle, like many of those I interviewed, this was initially triggered by the materials she both chose and used, and the meaning they carried into the interview setting and art-making process. The riso, with its bright pinks, vivid yellows, sudden bleeding reds, and bruised dark blue, pulsed with emotion for Axle, anchoring emotional registers in ways that shape what can be held, what can be said, and ultimately, what can be imagined.

The paper, glue, and colourful crayons were also not neutral in my interviews with workers and homeless survivors, acting as agents of feeling, constraint, and possibility. Sierra's process of depicting and describing her desired outcomes after sexual violence speaks to this. While not as evident as with Axle, who herself reflected on the ways in which the red on the back of one piece of riso made her remember the seriousness of sexual violence, prompting a feeling of anger rather than hope, I suggest that for Sierra, the crayons lead her back to the creation of a collage where she imagines herself healed, untouched by what she has endured. It is worth noting that Sierra's depiction did differ from Axle's in both material and affective registers, with the softer, flowing colours of crayon inviting an imagining of healing and safety, a fragile refuge from trauma. Yet despite this, the materials continued to lack neutrality, operating as one of the many forces pulling Sierra's imagination toward a specific way of seeing and feeling, a tentative hope entwined with the heavy reality of ongoing harm. As such, while Axle's use of riso triggered anger and seriousness through vivid, almost violent colour, Sierra's crayons coax her toward innocence and possibility, even as the weight of trauma punctures that fantasy.

What these reflections point to is that the choice of art material is central to a mediated processes through which such process becomes felt and embodied. Collage-making, perhaps like all art-making, thus unfolds as a situated negotiation in and through materials, gestures, and inherited legacies. In this sense, the process of choosing materials in collage-making is not secondary to materiality but constitutive of it. Every choice produces an embodied material encounter, narrowing or expanding what can be imagined. Extending Naples' (2003) argument that survivor speech is shaped by the social and institutional conditions from which it emerges, we might understand creative practice as similarly mediated. Imagined and created collages then do not arise outside of their conditions of production but through the textures, resistances, and affordances of the material world.

The fact that the physical materials that are selected within art-making, and in particular collage-making, come laden with histories of mass media, consumerism, state power, and punitive logics has of course been explored elsewhere. As Banash (2013) has argued, collage emerges from and continually reworks the detritus of modernity; scraps of advertising, newsprint, and bureaucratic forms whose circulation already encodes the ideological forces of commodification and governance. These fragments carry with them the traces of their institutional origins, due to the practice's 'narrative dimension', the result being that even though 'the final collage could well be shocking, critical, or irrational, it is assembled from the consistency of the commodity and mirrors and reproduces the operations of the consumerist lifeworld' (Banash 2013, pp. 14–17). In this sense, collage is never composed

of neutral matter, it is assembled from readymades whose very availability is shaped by the social, political, and economic structures that produce them. The affective intensities stirred by objects like riso or the soft waxiness of crayon thus cannot be disentangled from these longer cultural histories in that they channel, refract, and sometimes resist the visual economies that have long structured which bodies are recognisable as harmed, which harms are rendered legible, and what forms of justice are imaginable.

In developing Banash's suggestion, I propose that collage-making, when utilised by feminists and survivors, is also saturated with the materiality of feminism's testimonial legacies. As I have argued previously, the contemporary feminist listening public (Serisier 2024, p. 4; Lacey 2013) is shaped by a long history of practices that elevate survivor speech as intrinsically transgressive and morally urgent, constructing survivors as figures who must be believed without hesitation due to all they have survived (ackhurst 2025). Central to this is what Gavey and Schmidt (2011) refer to as the trauma of rape discourse, which constructs sexual violence as inherently life-altering. Not only this, but as Orgad's (2009) work on the survivor in contemporary culture points to, permanent healing after sexual violence continues to be deeply hungered after, despite the awareness of its lifelong consequences. It is within and through these histories that a forceful and affective figure—the *figure of the wounded survivor*—has emerged (ackhurst 2025, p. 9) as a powerful archetype. Produced through decades of narrative, political, and affective labour, this figure is marked by an innocence and vulnerability that demands protection, empathy, and above all, deference, which produces an ethical obligation to "be led by" survivors. Central to this "led-by" politics is a desire 'to combat the injustice that the figure of the wounded survivor has experienced by striving to give innocent survivors whatever they appear to want' (ackhurst 2025, p. 10), and a solidarity which is frequently marked by hostility and punitivity (Carvalho and Chamberlen 2018).

Pertinently, this testimonial inheritance and the affective figure it produces do not merely shape the stories feminists and survivors tell; they also structure the material conditions through which those stories can be made. In fact, these conditions are central to what I now refer to as feminism's state of stuckness (ackhurst 2024). This stuckness is a powerful and affective state of being that characterises contemporary feminist and survivor anti-rape politics and is defined by the urge to move forward and enact change to "get justice" for survivors, whatever that justice may be, whilst simultaneously being unable to do so (ackhurst 2024). In the context of collage, the wounded survivor is thus not only narrated but carried into the interview by broader cultural forces, altering what is then assembled, cut and glued into being. To return to my reflections on the interviews with Axle and Sierra, the riso scraps Axle gravitates toward can be understood as activated by the cultural script of the survivor whose wounds and innocence are central to feminist politics. Under the weight of the trauma-of-rape discourse (Gavey and Schmidt 2011), seriousness becomes not only an emotional response but an epistemic requirement, for anger is what makes the injustice legible. Sierra, too, appears to feel this pull with the crayons' childlike softness offering a fleeting fantasy of innocence restored, yet that same innocence is already demanded of her by the wounded-survivor template. When she calls for something to be done due to the unfairness of what she has survived—and it is worth stressing that sexual violence is deeply unfair and unjust—she is thus pulled to enact the same moral grammar that positions the survivor's hurt as a call to action, a grammar that makes injury both the evidence of injustice and the grounds for imagining its redress through punishment.

While my analysis thus far has focused on empirical work from interview participants, I also argue that contemporary feminist and survivor art and artists using collage are frequently affected by the material and discursive conditions I have traced thus far. This is pertinent because feminist collage-making often appears as a transgressive practice, one

capable of cutting into dominant visual orders, interrupting authority, and reassembling meaning on survivors' own terms. Princenthal's (2022, p. 245) discussion of Betty Tompkins's *Apologia* series offers a striking example of these conditions at work. Across numerous pieces, Tompkins overlays small reproductions of canonical art-historical images—many depicting sex, violence, or both—with the verbatim, unapologetic "apology" statements made by powerful artists accused of predation. Rendered in bright pink script and superimposed onto the reproductions, these statements force the collision of two visual regimes: the celebrated authority of the Western art canon and the everyday misogyny of those in power such as Chuck Close, Matt Lauer and R Kelly. This use of collage is emotionally powerful and, for Princenthal, operates as a transgressive revelation of the underlying and constant violence women and girls experience, all the while demonstrating how materials can be mobilised to confront entrenched hierarchies.

Yet the affective force of these works also reveals the limits through which such disruption operates. Indeed, I propose that central to the affective power of Tompkins' images is the recurring figure of the wounded survivor, which not only shapes the types of feelings that are produced for viewer but also the justice Tompkins appears to demand. For example, in *Apologia (Mary Shepard Greene Blumenstein)*, the depiction of a 'ghostly, light pink figure' hunched over 'extending a thin, fragile arm as though reaching a person or object that lies just beyond the frame' (Cohen 2018) evokes a familiar wounded and innocent figure. This in turn mobilises a sense of injustice as the viewer is invited to reflect on the ways in which violence has 'been obliterating women for years' (Bean Gilsford 2021). Central to this emotion is that written across this frail body are the words of performance artist and professor Avital Ronell, who was accused of assaulting the NYU graduate student Nimrod Reitman while working as his academic advisor: our 'communications were repeatedly invited, responded to and encouraged by him over a period of three years' (Greenberg 2018).

Apologia (Artemisia Gentileschi #3) extends this dynamic, demonstrating how imaginaries of justice are materially assembled through collage itself. Here the male abuser appears to cower beneath justificatory language, in this instance Chuck Close's claim that 'I've done nothing wrong and I'm being crucified' after allegations of sexual harassment emerged in 2018 (Moynihan and Pogrebin 2018). Crucially, this emerges through Tompkins' selection and reworking of Jael and Sisera, a biblical scene depicting a woman killing an invading commander to protect herself and her people from sexual violence. As a material component of the collage, this inherited image imports an already legible visual grammar of righteous vengeance. The act of cutting, positioning, and layering Gentileschi's scene does not simply illustrate rage but helps produce it, directing affect toward retaliation as a recognisable response to harm. In this way, collage appears to unsettle dominant narratives while simultaneously relying upon established visual repertoires through which injury, innocence, and redress can be imagined. The transgressive practice therefore unfolds through materials that quietly delimit its horizons, channelling justice back into familiar affective and political forms.

The process of collage-making thus both unsettles dominant narratives and remains tethered to the inherited visual and affective vocabularies through which injury, innocence, and redress become recognisable. Collage can thus be understood as a site of what McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2011) call tightrope talk, this being a precarious negotiation between expressing agency and avoiding the appearance of blame, between articulating harm and resisting the flattening pull of dominant trauma of rape discourse. Yet, as the foregoing analysis demonstrates, collage does not merely reflect these discursive tensions. Rather the materiality through which works are assembled actively mediates these tensions, fuelling and sustaining the affective and discursive force of feminist legacies that centre the

figure of the wounded survivor. This is because collage-making proceeds through materials already saturated with cultural meaning, and as such, the act of cutting, selecting, and layering becomes a negotiation conducted through affective and discursive constraints. Riso, with its bleeding edges and saturated hues, pushes Axle toward the gravity of injury, reinforcing the wounded survivor's seriousness. Crayon, with its childlike palette, tugs Sierra toward a posture of gentle vulnerability, reaffirming the innocence that feminist testimonial cultures often require. Each stroke, tear, and colour choice becomes a balancing act, a materialised version of the discursive tightrope feminists and survivors walk when speaking about and representing rape. This represents the balance between needing to convey the depth of harm without being consumed by it and needing to assert that an injustice has taken place without risking misinterpretation as culpability or weakness. Collage, then, while constituting a practice that can be used to give voice, also participates in (re)producing the wounded survivor, which in turn shapes what can be said and imagined within the dense, affectively charged terrain of feminist anti-rape politics.

5. Temporal Collage and the Refusal of Closure in *Sorry Baby*

Yet not every practice of collage is bound in the same way as *Sorry Baby*, Victor's (2025) debut depicting a PhD student's experience of the aftermath of sexual violence, providing a poignant counterexample. As this article's epigraph points to, *Sorry Baby* can be understood as a collage of images, sounds, and gestures, which has been described by film reviewer Adrian Horton as 'a warm, bitingly funny refocus of the trauma plot' (Horton 2025; Sehgal 2021). Yet what distinguishes the film from the collages created by those I interviewed is not simply its tone but the material process through which this refocusing is achieved. As the distinctions that exist between the published script and Victor's reflections on the film's production process indicate, deliberate choices were made in the edit to further fragment the timeline of Agnes' life. While the film starts many years after the abuse, we then return to days before the abuse, and as we bounce back and forth, Victor repeatedly dislocates viewers from causal sequence. In this way, Agnes' healing is shown to be far from linear, perhaps even suggesting that truly healing after sexual violence is not entirely possible.

Significantly, the fragmentation of *Sorry Baby* is not merely an aesthetic choice, but an active refusal of conventional narratives around sexual violence. Rather than consolidating Agnes within feminism's familiar wounded figure, whose injury anchors moral urgency and demands redress, Victor deliberately assembles a subject who continues living alongside harm. Justice consequently appears not as closure, punitivity or punishment, and therefore not as one that is pulled by feminism's wounded figure. Instead, Victor assembles a subject who continues to live alongside harm, while navigating the living of what Mulla (2016) refers to as a just life. As Victor herself notes, echoing Brison's (2008) observations of the inevitable trace sexual violence leaves, she wanted *Sorry Baby* to show that 'there's really no destination. There are milestones, but it's not like you land and then forget that nothing was ever done' (Jackson 2025). In this context, fragmentation becomes a conscious and material practice that loosens the grip of feminist and cultural expectations that sexual violence must culminate in either devastation or recovery. The disjointed cuts, overlapping voices, and sharp moments of unexpected humour refuse the smooth narrative that conventional representations of trauma often demand. Fragmentation for Victor becomes a method of resisting not only the trauma plot but its discourse's suggestion that sexual violence is inherently life-shattering and an experience that must be overcome through particular kinds of justice.

What Victor achieves then is not simply a rejection of the trauma plot but a reorientation to the material and discursive conditions through which survivor subjectivity is ordinarily produced. Her account of the film's development, describing it as 'a lot of work

to do, to figure out how to find empathy for this character, who isn't me but is built around me' (Jackson 2025), articulates a process that is strikingly at odds with the testimonial habits that structure contemporary feminist listening. Rather than presenting harm as self-evident or morally compelling, Victor lingers in the indeterminate space of figuring out how the story might be told at all, and what kind of subject this telling would bring into being. By assembling her own fragments she therefore refuses the ready-made visual vocabulary through which sexual violence is usually recognised and validated. Instead, the film draws its force from the slow, iterative, and often mundane labour of editing: the sensor's grain, the drag of an interface, the awkward rhythm of a scene not yet resolved. Significantly, these are not incidental technical details but the material conditions that shape what can be said and felt. As Banash (2013) and others remind us, fragmentation is not inherently radical; it can reproduce the very logics it seeks to unsettle. Yet Victor's fragmentation operates differently. Similarly to Tompkins's *Apologia*, Victor's digital collage harnesses fragmentation to expose the scaffolding that props up dominant narratives of trauma, harm, and recovery. In her hands, however, disjunction becomes a method for refusing the smooth arc that the trauma plot demands, this being the spectacular event, the collapse, the triumphal return. The film lingers instead in the ongoingness of aftermath, in the uneven labour of living with what has happened, without insisting that this labour must culminate in redemption or devastation. In doing so, *Sorry Baby* participates in crafting a survivor-subject who is neither exemplary nor wounded in the familiar ways, but something else entirely: an emergent and potentially freer figure made possible through the material practice of art, rather than the discursive scripts that normally bind her.

Importantly, this does not mean cinematic collage is more able to escape material constraint and in so doing buck the trauma plot. As a manifold of films point to—such as Emerald Fennel's 2021 *Promising Young Women* (Horton 2021)—feminist cinematic depictions of the aftermath of sexual violence frequently recycle the figure of the wounded survivor and the narrative that due to the injustice of sexual violence punishment and punitivity is essential. The digital is also far from immaterial. Camera sensors, compression formats, editing software, and platform infrastructures embed aesthetic norms and political assumptions that shape representation. Indeed, *Sorry Baby* is also deeply material. Footage layers according to technological affordances, sound synchronisation produces intimacy or distance, and temporal discontinuity depends upon editable timelines that make fragmentation possible. However, what distinguishes Victor's practice is not freedom from materiality but a different engagement with it stemming perhaps from Victor's artistic practice, who she is in the world, and the cultural forces that have shaped her.

My argument, then, is neither to privilege cinematic collage over physical collage nor to romanticise digital media, but instead to carefully attend to the material conditions of making. This is because not only are the tangible materials far from neutral, but neither are the bodies they interact with, both shaping the imagination and calls for justice. Not only this but, as *Sorry Baby* points to, through an ongoing negotiation between maker, medium and feminist legacies, it is possible to reinscribe or loosen the discursive hold of the wounded survivor, shaping not only how sexual violence is represented but what futures of justice can be conceived. As such, in the friction—the tightrope—between imaginative intent and material affordance and between what artists seek to express and what materials allow, collage becomes not merely expressive but politically generative, holding trauma, memory, and possibility within the very conditions of its making.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that collage is not merely a representational technique but a material process that shapes what can be imagined after sexual violence. By foreground-

ing the *process* of collage-making as central, I have shown that creative practices are sites where dominant survivor scripts are negotiated rather than simply expressed, and where those who seek to represent sexual violence walk a tightrope. This is because the histories embedded in paper, ink, crayon, and digital interfaces interact with embodied gesture and feminist testimonial legacies to mediate affect and possibility. Recognising this entanglement does not require abandoning collage, nor does it romanticise alternative media. Instead, this article calls for careful attention to the conditions of making. If feminist politics seeks futures beyond carceral inevitability, then the work of imagination must account for its material scaffolding. Process is not incidental to justice; it is one of the ways justice becomes thinkable.

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