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# INTRODUCTION: CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING VICTIMHOOD IN GLOBAL POLITICS

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Questions about who can and cannot be considered a victim permeate almost all efforts to describe, map, legislate, resist and/or dismantle harms both specific and systemic in nature. Discourses of victimhood inform individual, group and national identities, shape peacebuilding and transitional justice programmes, and set the boundaries of debate about migration, sex work, crime, empire and much else besides.<sup>1</sup> These formations are not wholly specific to our present moment, of course: Alyson Cole has described how the 1970s “war on welfare” identified “victimists” unwilling or unable to adopt neoliberal postures of self-reliance, pitting them against “anti-victimist” conservatives who themselves claimed to be threatened by a feminised system of political correctness.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in recent years victimhood has been prominently weaponised as part of a rising tide of anti-genderism, nativism, white supremacy,

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Tami Amanda Jacoby, “A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-based Identity”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2015): 511-530; Roxani C. Krystalli, “Narrating victimhood: dilemmas and (in)dignities”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, no issue number (2021): 1-22; Adam B. Lerner, “The uses and abuses of victimhood nationalism in international politics”, *European Journal of International Relations* 26 (2020): 62-87. See also Bird, this volume, & Holliday, this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Alyson Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 36

and other markers of the far right's ongoing resurgence.<sup>3</sup> As Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser have recently suggested, this rapid and expansive proliferation of claims to victimhood warrants renewed attention.<sup>4</sup>

While victimhood's appeal and resonance are evident in a broad range of contexts, however, its social valence once ascribed, claimed or recognised is less clear. Victimhood's meanings are multiple, unstable and continually under contestation, in ways that not only shape the contours and boundaries of the democratic state but also help to redefine the academy's function and purpose within it. Positivist claims to disinterested enquiry hold little weight here: when it comes to victimhood, scholarship – and especially critical traditions of scholarship – sit at the eye of the storm.

An example: in 2018, the magazine *Areo* published an article entitled “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship”. In it, the article's three authors revealed that they had spent the previous year submitting hoax academic papers to a range of journals, building their arguments around apparently outlandish premises and fabricating datasets in support of their conclusions. Seven of their submissions had been accepted for publication. The authors claimed their scheme had “expose[d] the reality” of what they termed “grievance studies”, which they claimed had “corrupt[ed] academic research” while becoming “fully established, if not fully dominant” within disciplines including gender studies, psychoanalysis and sociology.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lillie Chouliaraki and Sarah Banet-Weiser “Introduction to special issue: The logic of victimhood” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 2021;24(1):3-9

<sup>4</sup> Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations taken from James A. Lindsay, Peter Boghossian and Helen Pluckrose, “Academic Grievance Studies and the Corruption of Scholarship”, *Areo*, 2 October 2018. Available at <https://areomagazine.com/2018/10/02/academic-grievance-studies-and-the-corruption-of-scholarship/> (last accessed 17 November 2021).

The “grievance studies” hoax exploited an editorial and reviewing system predicated on the good faith of its participants.<sup>6</sup> That such a system can be abused is neither a novel insight nor a problem unique to the disciplines and journals targeted by the hoaxers.<sup>7</sup> Yet the affair nevertheless exemplifies a wider hostility towards a perceived “culture of victimhood” supposedly characteristic of feminist, anti-racist, queer and other critically-oriented traditions of thought and practice.<sup>8</sup> These sentiments found their apotheosis in the *1776 Report*, commissioned by President Donald Trump and published shortly before his departure from office. Bemoaning the state of university education in the United States, the *Report* called “all Americans [to] reject false and fashionable ideologies that... tell America’s story solely as one of oppression and victimhood rather than one of... unprecedented achievement toward freedom, happiness, and fairness for all”.<sup>9</sup>

The *1776 Report*’s appeal to victimhood as a way of discrediting any attempt to reckon with historical and ongoing patterns of harm typifies a formulation that has become increasingly familiar across the Global North. In the UK, for example, long-standing calls to stop “feeling guilty about [Britain’s] colonial history”<sup>10</sup> have been amplified by the March 2021 publication of a report by the UK Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities [UKCRED].

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<sup>6</sup> Mikko Lagerspetz, “‘The Grievance Studies Affair’ Project: Reconstructing and Assessing the Experimental Design”, *Science, Technology and Human Values* 46 (2021): 402-424; cf. Joel P. Christensen and Matthew A. Sears, “The Overlooked Messages of the Sokal-Squared Hoax”, *Inside Higher Ed*, October 30 2018. Available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/10/30/sokal-squared-hoax-was-put-down-scholars-concerned-racial-issues-opinion> (last accessed 17 November 2021).

<sup>7</sup> For a prominent recent example of research misconduct in the natural sciences, see Jeremy Berg, “Editorial Retraction”, *Science* 356 (2017): 812

<sup>8</sup> Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 229; cf. Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). Cf. Alyson Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report*, available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf> (last accessed 17 November 2021), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Nigel Biggar “Don’t feel guilty about our colonial history” *The Times*, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/don-t-feel-guilty-about-our-colonial-history-ghvstdhmj> (last accessed 31/11/21)

Founded in the wake of widespread Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020, the UKCRED was headed by figures who had well-known reservations about the existence of systemic racism and the value of multiculturalism. It was therefore little surprise that the Commission's report urged people of ethnic minority backgrounds to reject a "fatalistic narrative that says the deck is permanently stacked against them", and criticised the "liberal" use of terms like "institutional racism".<sup>11</sup>

In the UK and elsewhere in Europe, the academy has been targeted as a space where such narratives supposedly flourish. In the UK, the Conservative government's forthcoming Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill proposes to appoint a governmental "free speech champion" responsible for investigating and reporting campus violations of free speech legislation, enabling speakers with "heterodox views" who have been no-platformed to seek compensation from universities.<sup>12</sup> However, the "freedom" the bill seeks to protect will not extend to all subjects evenly: the bill places severe restrictions on students' right to disrupt, protest or otherwise register their disapproval about events held on their campuses, for example.<sup>13</sup>

Aside from their immediate relevance to our profession, these contestations and controversies are outlined here in order to illuminate the foundational convictions from which this Symposium proceeds. All of the contributions gathered in this Symposium recognise that victimhood is woven into the ways in which subjects evaluate and make sense of suffering, that it colours their understanding of the social formations that institutionalise certain patterns of harm, and that it helps to circumscribe the contours and boundaries of political possibility

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<sup>11</sup> UK Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities "The Report", March 2021, available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974507/20210331 - CRED Report - FINAL - Web Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331_-_CRED_Report_-_FINAL_-_Web_Accessible.pdf) (last accessed 30/11/21), pp.1-258, p.8 and p.34.

<sup>12</sup> The House of Commons "Higher Education Freedom of Speech Explanatory Notes", May 2021, available at <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/41480/documents/213> (last accessed 30/11/21), pp. 1-15.

<sup>13</sup> UK Department for Education "Higher Education: Free Speech and Academic Freedom". UK Department for Education Policy Paper, 17 February 2021. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-free-speech-and-academic-freedom> (accessed 12 December 2021)

in these formations' shadow. For these reasons, our contributors are all keenly aware that victimhood can diminish people's experiences, "undermin[ing] collectivity and depoliticiz[ing] claims to injustice" as well as providing the basis for new subjective categories and affinities.<sup>14</sup>

Understood in these terms, it is clear that victimhood is not an unmediated or natural position defined simply by one's position on the receiving end of an injury, but is instead a constructed category, status or identity. Of course, this is not to deny that our social systems and structures produce injuries: they do, in ways that are far from arbitrary. Yet to describe these harms using the language of victimhood immediately mediates them, bringing material harms into a discursive field where their meaning can be established, undermined, and contested.

From this basic premise, three aims emerge that guide the contributions to this Symposium. First, our contributors seek to understand victimhood as an active and productive force. Victimhood does not simply describe trajectories of violence and exploitation, but also shapes how societies organise themselves around perceived harms. In this capacity it can help to sediment identities and provide a glue for the formation of new social groups. At the same stroke, it also (re)produces silences, exclusions and the patterns of violence that enable them.

Second, this collection of essays takes stock of the global dimensions of victimhood, asking how it is mobilised in different geographies and locations, and to what effect. The Symposium presents case studies from Tunisia, the United States, South Korea, Greece, and the Mekong region of South-East Asia. This breadth of scope amply illustrates the ubiquitous and widespread nature of appeals to victimhood. Yet the term "global" denotes more than just a range of locales in which discourses of victimhood either do or do not circulate. Victimhood is not just "global" because it happens here, there, or elsewhere, but also because it is inextricable from interconnections, relations and flows that cut across the boundaries of

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<sup>14</sup> Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood*, 6.

specific political communities. In their construction and effects, discourses of victimhood both constitute and redirect these relations.

Third, by emphasizing victimhood's constructed nature, the Symposium seeks to foreground questions of agency, power and struggle. Rather than asking who *is* a victim, our contributors follow Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser by interrogating the positions from which claims to victimhood are made.<sup>15</sup> This is an important difference because condemnations of “victim culture” – of which victimhood's invocation in the context of higher education is representative – often function by dislocating injuries from the social structures and imbalances of power that enable them. This is in and of itself a circumscriptive move that seeks to close off the possibility of critique, enquiry, and social and political change. Moreover, it has enabled the political right paradoxically to frame itself as a minority under threat: to claim that a particular (implicitly white, masculine, heteronormative) way of life is being repressed by political correctness, safe spaces, equality programmes, or demographic change.<sup>16</sup> As Alison Phipps rightly observes, it is precisely because of its proximity to power that “whiteness is predisposed to woundedness”, for which reason discourses of victimhood can quite comfortably be yoked to hegemonic interests.<sup>17</sup> This Symposium seeks to understand where, how, and why this is the case, and whether something more transformative and emancipatory might be salvaged from the wreckage.

The Symposium brings together scholars and practitioners from a variety of fields and disciplines across the humanities and social sciences in order to develop a critical and interdisciplinary examination of victimhood that reflects its political, multiple, and contested nature. Each contribution identifies a space where claims to victimhood have animated or

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<sup>15</sup> Chouliaraki and Banet-Weiser, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Lydia Riley “Introduction: the free speech wars” in Charlotte Lydia Riley (ed) *The free speech wars: How did we get here and why does it matter?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1-19, 6

<sup>17</sup> Alison Phipps, *Me Not You : The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 68

frustrated efforts to reckon with patterns of suffering, injury or exploitation. What is victimhood's purpose and function in these spaces? How does it interact with and reconfigure political systems and institutions, and how does it discipline or restrain the lives of those it touches? In grappling with these questions, the Symposium makes no attempt to adjudicate between different claims to victimhood: we have no interest in defining who is or is not "really" a victim. Instead, the Symposium asks who gets to make claims to victimhood, how those claims are affirmed or denied and by whom. In so doing, the Symposium illuminates five instances of what Jeffery and Candea call "victimhood work", or the consequences, outcomes and effects that follow from the invocation and culturally mediated representation of victimhood as an identity, category or status.<sup>18</sup>

Two related conclusions emerge from the Symposium's discussion. The first is that meaning of victimhood in any given situation is determined by prevailing societal formations, including those concerned with race, gender and sexuality. For this reason, victimhood discourses often reinforce existing global political hierarchies, institutions and relations, veiling the disproportionate preponderance of harms that fall on women, people of colour in both the Global North and South, the queer, the poor, and other marginalised demographics. To this end, the Symposium points not only to the appeals to victimhood that have accompanied the recent and ongoing rise of chauvinist, fascist and white supremacist movements, but also to the role of victimhood discourses in the sex industry (Holliday), in Trump's rhetoric towards China (Coulson), in the 1987 bombing of a South Korean aircraft (Park-Kang), in European policy towards refugees and migrants (Bird), in contestations over the value of Black lives (Perez and Salter) and in gender mainstreaming programmes (Kebaili).

To illustrate the last two of these, Perez and Salter in this volume show how the legitimacy of movements like Black Lives Matter is determined by racialised notions of

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Jeffery & Matei Candea, "The Politics of Victimhood", *History and Anthropology* 17 (2006): 288.



“respectability” that privilege a particular (largely non-disruptive) way of doing protest. As they argue, BLM’s critique of police violence, white supremacy and the carceral state insists that Black people have the right to claim victimhood “regardless of any potential ‘non-respectable’ behaviors in their past”.<sup>19</sup> Kebaili, meanwhile, describes how gender-mainstreaming projects in post-revolutionary Tunisia imagine Tunisian women as the passive victims of a patriarchal Islamic culture. In the process, they not only essentialize Tunisian culture, but also obscure Tunisian women’s agency and activism.

Second, the Symposium emphasises the instability of all articulations of victimhood, and the ways in which they are thereby subject to ongoing resignification and contestation. An example is provided by Holliday, who points out that sex workers in the Mekong region have reshaped their labour as “entertainment” in order to resituate themselves in relation to a hostile legal system that conflates sex workers with trafficked women and takes little interest in the challenges faced by those who occupy the first category but not the second. In this context, who is or is not a victim, and what precisely they are a victim of, is subjected to constant interrogation.

Of course, to speak of victimhood’s instability builds neatly on the principles outlined above: like all discourses, victimhood provides structure to meaning and identity but cannot finally fix them in place.<sup>20</sup> However, one reason it remains important to foreground victimhood’s instability is that the contradictions and disputes to which it gives rise open space for alternative analytic and political possibilities. These possibilities are exemplified by Bird’s contribution, which explores the ways in which discourses of victimhood press upon migrants at the borders of the European Union. Bird encourages us to consider the material aspects of victimhood and precarity, emphasising the conditions and contexts that render people

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<sup>19</sup> Perez and Salter, this Symposium.

<sup>20</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), 18.

vulnerable instead of focusing on individuals as passive or unfortunate victims of circumstance. Here and elsewhere, the Symposium does valuable work by staking out terrain from which to consider victimhood as a dynamic, variable and global phenomenon implicated in attempts to imagine ways of living otherwise, as well as in circumscriptive practices of violence.

Questions remain, therefore, about whether victimhood is a desirable framework with which to reckon with the vectors and patterns of suffering that characterise our world's political relations, systems, and institutions. By showing how Trump's victimhood nationalism empowers those in positions of power, Coulson suggests that victimhood discourses can entrench social hierarchies. Park-Kang is similarly circumspect, highlighting how the gendered depiction of plane bomber Hyunhee Kim as a naïve and innocent "virgin" granted her a special pardon at the expense of the people she killed, whose families continue to seek justice. One motivation for Coulson and Park-Kang's doubts lies in the way that claims to victimhood often function as demands for moral clarity. To say that such a person or group are "victims" is to state that harm has been directed in *this* direction, towards *these* people, by *this* responsible party. Our discussion suggests that the moral clarity the "victim" label often seeks to provide rarely maps neatly onto the sorts of disputes that it is mobilised to decide upon.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, however, the Symposium also shows how a direct engagement with the terms and stakes of victimhood discourses – whether by bodily resistance, discursive resignification or a combination of the two – can also contest the underlying patterns of harm that it describes, organises or obscures. Perez and Salter, for example, show decisively how recent assertions of Black lives' value have challenged frameworks that impose stringent demands on what sorts of injuries (in particular, those directed at Black bodies, subjects and communities) can be recognised and responded to. While the contributors to this Symposium are largely circumspect about whether the language of victimhood can be jettisoned or

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<sup>21</sup> Jacoby, "A Theory of Victimhood", 511.

overcome, here and elsewhere they make clear that there remains scope for its re-evaluation. Such efforts not only gesture towards alternative modalities through which the systemic harms and injuries that continue to define global politics can be identified, but also prefigure alternative modes of solidarity through which they can be resisted and transfigured.