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## **Whose personal is more political? Experience in contemporary feminist politics**

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### Abstract

Whose personal is more political? This paper rethinks the role of experience in contemporary feminism, arguing that it can operate as a form of capital within abstracted and decontextualised debates which entrench existing power relations. Although experiential epistemologies are crucial to progressive feminist thought and action, in a neoliberal context in which the personal and emotional is commodified powerful groups can mobilise traumatic narratives to gain political advantage. Through case study analysis this paper shows how privileged feminists, speaking for others and sometimes for themselves, use experience to generate emotion and justify particular agendas, silencing critics who are often from more marginalised social positions. The use of the experiential as capital both reflects and perpetuates the neoliberal invisibilisation of structural dynamics: it situates all experiences as equal, and in the process fortifies existing inequalities. This competitive discursive field is polarising, and creates selective empathies through which we tend to discredit others' realities instead of engaging with their politics. However, I am not arguing for a renunciation of the politics of experience: instead, I ask that we resist its commodification and respect varied narratives while situating them in a structural frame.

### Introduction

This paper rethinks the role of experience in contemporary feminist politics, set in the context of the neoliberal commodification of first-person narratives. Building on existing analyses of what experience *is* in relation to the epistemological and political, it asks questions about what experience *does*. Through the examination of two key case studies, I argue that the appropriation of 'survivor stories' and rhetorical use of distressing experiences by the powerful and privileged, often in collaboration with conservative agendas, turns them into a kind of 'investment capital' in what Sara Ahmed terms 'affective economies' (2012[2004]: 45), by mobilising them to generate feeling and create political gain. In the process, structural dynamics are masked; the privileged are able to capitalise on the personal and deflect critique by marginalised groups whose realities are invisibilised or dismissed, even as they are spoken for. This also has a polarising effect which inhibits connections across differing experiences: indeed, we often participate in *selective empathies* where we discredit the realities of those who articulate opposing politics.

This paper does not intend to play into what Ahmed identifies as contemporary dismissals of feminism as being primarily a politics of emotion (based on the already pathologised and assumed emotionality of femininity), which juxtapose this against mainstream politics presumed to be grounded in reason (2012 [2004]: 170). Nor do I wish to rehearse the tendency she identifies in some strands of feminist thought and politics to see the emotional and experiential as a problem (Ahmed, 2012 [2004]: 171). However, in keeping with the constructive tradition of contextualising feminisms within particular conditions of knowledge production (Hesford and Diedrich, 2014; Lamm, 2014), I wish to highlight and problematise some ways in which experience has become commodified in the contemporary political field. I end with a plea to resist this commodification and the selective empathies it generates, while situating our first-person politics through structural analysis.

### Experience in feminist theory

‘The personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1969). It was a revolutionary phrase which illuminated the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s and after, coined in response to claims that consciousness-raising was navel-gazing with no coherent programme for social change (Hanish 1969). The sentiment was not, of course, original: an early, and iconic, example of testimonial activism is Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech to the Akron Women’s Rights Convention, which infused sociopolitical critique with rawness and immediacy through her experiences of pain and violence (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 77). As Danielle McGuire (2010) documents, the US civil rights movement was rooted in a powerful (and now largely obscured) sexual violence politics articulated through personal narrative. Famous activists such as Ida B Wells, whose speeches situated the rape of black women by white men within an analysis of racist oppression (McGuire, 2010: xviii), and Rosa Parks, who was ‘an antirape activist long before she became the patron saint of the bus boycott’ (McGuire, 2010: xvii), were at the forefront of a dynamic congregation of women who ‘deploy[ed] their voices as weapons’ (McGuire, 2010: xix) by testifying about their assaults.

The fact that we associate the politicisation of experience with second-wave radical feminism speaks to the structural racism of the feminist movement; a key focus for this paper is the continued dynamics between privilege and marginality in feminist politics. While (largely white) radical feminists used the personal as a basis for activism, (largely white and middle class) feminist academics codified this through epistemological theorising. This posed a direct challenge to the established belief that ‘personal problems’ should not be a basis for knowledge or be brought into the public arena. A research base was built, focusing on gendered experiences, which fed these theoretical confrontations with the generic (white, masculine) ‘knower’ (Code, 2014) and operationalised the principle of ‘theory in the flesh’ (Calderon et al, 2012: 521). The construction of feminist knowledge-making as a language of speakers and hearers (Code, 2014) also brought to light the impossibility of objective analysis (Haraway, 1988; Code, 2014) and generated pedagogies based on the sharing and discussion of narratives (Huber et al, 2013; Belenky et al, 1986).

This institutionalisation of the politics of the personal prompted challenges from those relegated to the margins, particularly the black feminists to whom so much was owed. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and explorations of how Western feminisms had been co-opted by colonial discourses and projects (Mohanty, 1984)

exposed the false universalism of ‘women’s experience’, and the construction of the feminist ‘knower’ in the image of privilege (Baldwin, 2013). In response, it was argued that those on the perimeters of feminism had access to special forms of insight: the exploration of the structural and discursive spaces occupied by black women/scholars as ‘outsiders within’ (Hill Collins, 1986: S15) uncovered hidden forms of creativity and distinctive and important standpoints on self, family and society. Ideas of epistemic injustice (Code, 2014) and questions about who can know and speak (Spivak, 1988) continue to be central to feminist theory and activism, and are also central to the analysis in this paper.

As the second-wave of feminism turned into the third, the status of experience was secured. Conversations between feminist epistemologies and postmodern theory, and a ‘turn to narrative’ in social science research (Huber et al, 2013: 217), generated beautiful, nuanced auto-ethnographic work. Structures such as colonialism and their relationships to identity, gender and sexuality were illuminated in new ways (see for example Jiménez, 2006), and first-person narratives from the sex industry gave complex insights into gendered objectification (see for example Egan et al, 2006). It has been argued that we are now witnessing a fourth-wave of feminism in which the Internet plays a key role (Munro, 2013): in online spaces, intersectional feminists use storytelling as an antidote to the invisibility and silencing which characterise oppressions based on race, class and gender (Steele, 2012; Wilkins, 2012). This has generated a veritable treasure trove of grassroots blogs, photoblogs and social media archives. Within this, women of colour, sex workers and trans people tell of societal oppressions and personal traumas, around which social movements have coalesced. For instance, the Tumblr of American trans girl Leelah Alcorn, who took her own life in 2014 after leaving a detailed account of the cruelty of so-called ‘conversion therapy’, inspired a petition against the practice with more than 300,000 signatories (Pilkington, 2015).

Across its third and fourth waves, feminism has also been central to the theorisation of emotion and the so-called ‘affective turn’ in social, political and cultural theory (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012). These have been attempts to write embodied experience back into analysis, often grounded in the conviction that postmodernism has written it out: although as Clare Hemmings (2005) argues, this ignores the prior contributions of postcolonial and feminist thinkers. A central concern within studies of emotion and affect is how these phenomena shape/are shaped by the political sphere. For instance, Ann Cvetkovich’s (2003) work explores publics formed in and by trauma, such as lesbian cultures around incest, or HIV and AIDS activism. Ahmed (2012 [2004]) uncovers how the politics of emotion creates social and cultural Others through the generation of affect and constitution of subjectivities. Sianne Ngai (2005) analyses the political work done by negative emotions such as envy, anxiety and paranoia in a variety of cultural artefacts. There has also been attention to the relationship between feminism and pain, building on Wendy Brown’s (1995) insights into the limitations of ‘wounded identities’, although not necessarily subscribing to her conclusions about letting them go (Ahmed, 2012 [2004]).<sup>1</sup> Experience, then, remains foundational to feminist theorising, but continues to be contested in a number of ways.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Rentschler 2011 for an important rebuttal of Brown’s argument from the perspective of the victims’ rights movement.

### Experience in feminist politics

The discussion in this paper draws from the perspectives above, alongside contestations around epistemic privilege and marginality and critical theorisations of experience itself. Experience must be differentiated from emotion and affect, which themselves have often been used interchangeably (Gorton, 2007: 334).<sup>2</sup> Joan Scott defines experience as a ‘linguistic event’ (1991: 793): I argue that this is also embodied, and often suffused with emotion/affect, but not reducible to either. In similar ways to the theorists of affect mentioned above, my interest is in how experience enters the political. I find Ahmed’s concept of ‘affective economies’ (2012 [2004]: 45) useful; this describes emotions as a form of capital, generated by the circulation of objects (such as bodies) and signs (such as the burning cross). I start from the premise that these objects and signs are often situated within experiential narratives. Experience can therefore be described as a kind of ‘investment capital’, a currency of objects and signs which generates further capital in the form of feeling. My analysis focuses on how experiences are ‘invested’ into feminist politics, often as part of battles for epistemic privilege or political gain. As part of this process, some ‘personals’ become more important politically than others.

I also draw on the work of Scott (1991) and Linda Alcoff (1991), who have both theorised how experience operates as epistemology and politics. Scott (1991) examines the ‘turn to experience’ in historical analysis, arguing that although this made a diversity of stories and oppressions visible, it tended to reify personal narrative as the origin of explanation, in the process dehistoricising it and essentialising identities. If experience is our starting point, she contends, we lose a focus on the historical conditions that shape and produce it and risk shoring up rather than contesting ideological systems. Alcoff (1991) charts critiques of ‘speaking for others’: those emerging from the development of situated epistemologies in which we cannot fully know another’s truth, and those based on awareness of the relationships of privilege and power, from local to geopolitical, in which testimonial forms exist. My analysis builds on and develops this work, grounded in the idea of the epistemological authority of experience (Scott, 1991: p783), but moving from epistemology to politics: examining what experience *does* as it enters the feminist field. It explores the acts of speaking for others and speaking for oneself, as a means of gaining political purchase in adversarial debates. It reflects on how personal narrative can *actively* be used as a tool of silencing which works to reinforce the power of the dominant through capitalising upon emotional responses and invisibilising structural dynamics.

This paper is situated in the ‘discursive publics’ (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015: 239) of contemporary Western feminism, which encompass academic, activist, and public/media discussions. Although this field is broad, it has been argued that contemporary feminisms in the West are increasingly defined by what registers across media platforms (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). Furthermore, due to the permeation of media and social media into scholarship, often set within agendas around research impact, more academics (including myself) are visible and active in these spaces. This

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<sup>2</sup> As Gorton (2007: 334) explains, ‘Some argue that emotion refers to a sociological expression of feelings whereas affect is more firmly rooted in biology and in our physical response to feelings; others attempt to differentiate on the basis that emotion requires a subject while affect does not; and some ignore these distinctions altogether.’

certainly does not constitute the whole of contemporary feminism: these ‘discursive publics’ are dominated by voices from the UK and North America. Nevertheless, this has been identified as a field where high-profile debates are being constructed (Rentschler and Thrift 2015). Like all discursive contexts (Alcoff, 1991: 15), this is a highly politicised arena. Through the phenomena of ‘Twitter feminism’ (Park and Leonard, 2014) or ‘hashtag feminism’ (Loza, 2014) and the increasingly influential feminist blogosphere (Keller, 2012), activists from diverse and often marginalised communities are speaking for themselves and with each other, and entering into dialogues with more privileged academics and journalists who are being held accountable for their ideas. Experience and affect are key to these publics, partly due to the testimonial conventions of mainstream and social media, and also reflecting the influence of standpoint theory upon contemporary intersectional feminisms.

My analysis is also situated within the logics and practices of neoliberalism. This is a much-contested, much-discussed (and some might say over-used) term: nevertheless, it refers to a socio-economic-political framework which, although not the root of all contemporary evils, is an important shaping structure. This ‘market-political’ rationality (Brown, 2006: 291) has cascaded economic principles into the social realm as part of the assumption that societies function best with a minimum of state intervention (Harvey, 2005). Political and social problems are converted into market terms, becoming individual issues with consumption-based solutions (Brown, 2006: 704). As Brown contends, this privatisation and commodification of social life has structured subjectivities (2006: 693). The rationalities of neoliberalism atomise, interiorise and neutralise: the neoliberal self is an individualised one (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), constructed around the principles of agency and self-governance. Neoliberal reflexive projects of the self are characterised by introspection and narratives of self-actualisation (Giddens, 1991), often with economic metaphors (see for example Johnson, 2014; Rousmaniere, 2015). As part of this, experience and emotion have accrued value as forms of intelligence which can serve life and career goals for those in advantaged social positions (Hochschild, 1983; Ahmed, 2012 [2004]).

Within this framework the personal has simultaneously grown and shrunk as difference has flattened out into ‘diversity’ alongside a ‘tabloidisation’ (Glynn, 2000) and ‘testimonialism’ (Ahmed and Stacy, 2001) in which, perhaps in place of politics, popular culture and debate have been saturated with feeling. The phrase ‘disaster porn’ has been coined to describe the contemporary fascination with the troubles of others, which provides a repository for guilt or *schadenfreude* (Molotch, 2014). In this narcissistic and therapeutic neoliberal moment, as Ahmed (2012 [2004]) argues, personal pain can be depoliticised, or co-opted as it accumulates and stagnates in what Brown (1995) calls ‘wounded identities’ which both legitimate and depend upon state power.<sup>3</sup> For example, Carolyn Pedwell (2014) has highlighted how personal tragedies can be appropriated and mobilised by politicians and privileged ‘experts’, who use empathy as a technology of access to disadvantaged lives. In a marketplace of experience, the privileged inevitably have more platforms from which to narrate (see also Ahmed, (2012[2004]: 33), and the marginalised are often spoken for within

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<sup>3</sup> Carrie Rentschler (2011) provides an important counterpoint to this in her exploration of the political value of victimisation discourse.

agendas which are not their own. I will show in this paper that these characteristics of the neoliberal context are also evident within feminist politics.

#### Experience as capital: two case studies

The neoliberal commodification of distress is particularly germane to feminism, due to the enduring co-constitution of femininity and pain (Baker, 2010) and the centrality of experience to feminist epistemologies and politics. The contemporary movement is also situated in a dynamic with neoconservative frameworks, in which the strategic use of women's victimisation narratives by neo-imperialist and carceral projects, often in collaboration with liberal or radical feminist groups, can produce a defensive rejection of these narratives by third-wave and intersectional strands (Phipps, 2014). This architecture surrounds the interactions which constitute feminist discursive publics; these are characterised by contention and debate in which personal experience often becomes capital. I present two key examples below: the mobilisation of 'survivor stories' by sex industry abolitionists, and the use of the rape experience in trans-exclusionary feminist politics. In both, experience is deployed by privileged feminists (frequently in association with conservative agendas), who wield particular narratives to generate emotion and make political gains.

#### *'Survivor stories' in sex industry politics*

The sex industry 'survivor' is an abiding and central figure in feminist politics. Famous second-wave abolitionists Andrea Dworkin (herself an ex-sex worker) and Catharine MacKinnon made the voices of women exploited in pornography central to their legislative lobbying (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1997). Since then, such 'survivor stories' have acquired corporate gloss and wider exposure, as a key rhetorical tool for what has been termed the 'feminist rescue industry' (Agustin, 2007) constituted by policymakers, NGOs, women's groups and international organisations focused on using the criminal law to 'save' women from commercial sex. The relationship between this 'industry'<sup>4</sup> and neoconservative social and political projects has been captured by Elizabeth Bernstein with the term 'carceral feminism' (2010). This encapsulates how feminist opposition to the sex industry has bolstered and colluded with agendas around strengthening migration controls and the punitive power of the state (see Bumiller 2008 for an exploration of this dynamic in relation to sexual violence). The 'survivor stories' of this carceral feminism tap particular forms of Western empathy (see Pedwell, 2012, 2014), and are frequently deployed as capital in debates around legal regulation of the sex industry and sex workers' rights.

For example, in 2013, following two UN reports which advised that commercial sex should be decriminalised in order to help reduce HIV and AIDS and promote the human rights of sex workers (Global Commission on HIV and the Law, 2012; United Nations Development Programme, 2012), international organisation Equality Now launched a campaign entitled 'Listen to Survivors' (2015a, b). This used experiential narratives to urge the UN to instead promote measures criminalising the demand for sexual services. In a rhetorical sleight of hand, all these narratives concerned trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, even though both UN reports had opposed these practices and distinguished them from the consensual sale of sex. The phrase 'trafficking and prostitution' was common amongst the stories: an example of

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<sup>4</sup> I am not necessarily comfortable with the term 'industry', since this does not seem particularly apt to the impoverished women's sector, and also suggests a homogeneity of motive (in the form of a self-serving orientation), which seems a little harsh and overly simplistic.

the metonymy Ahmed identifies in which words (such as ‘Islam’ and ‘terrorist’) are stuck together to evoke particular responses (2012 [2004]: p76), and a tactic often used by sex industry opponents to discredit sex workers’ demands for rights (Massey, 2014; Congdon, 2014). Many of the narratives also recounted childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence, and some contained references to HIV and AIDS, in opposition to the UN reports which had linked sex industry decriminalisation with a reduction in these conditions. The narratives also contained graphic descriptions of rape and physical violence.

Similar ‘survivor stories’ have been used by in sex industry abolitionist initiatives in countries such as the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada and France (see for example Turn Off the Red Light, 2015; End Demand, 2015; New York State Anti-Trafficking Coalition, 2015; Congdon, 2014). Common to all are harrowing accounts of victimisation and suffering, including experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse, problematic substance use, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. These stories are deployed in support of a particular legislative agenda, usually that of ‘ending demand’ for commercial sex through criminalising clients and third parties. However, such manoeuvres rarely incorporate analyses which tie specific experiences to distinct parts of law or working practices: instead, the fact of suffering is used to bolster a sweeping moral case against the sex industry as a whole. This is usually done without reference to evidence that client criminalisation creates additional risks for sex workers and does not necessarily reduce prostitution (see for example Jessen, 2004; Levy, 2015). There are links here with campaigns against female genital cutting, which centre ‘native informants’ with harrowing personal accounts of trauma (Carle, 2014; United Nations, 2015; ITV News, 2014; Rudolph, 2014), but which often feed a politics defining all Muslim communities as inherently and uniquely misogynist, or all African countries as ignorant and ‘backward’, with little regard to the historical and cultural specificities which frame particular practices (Njambi, 2009).

Of course, the distress caused by experiences of forced prostitution and genital cutting should not be denied; however, this should not foreclose an analysis of what such ‘survivor stories’ do. Often, in relation to the sex industry, they are used to gain political advantage over grassroots groups who argue for decriminalisation. The capital provided by experience, bolstered by the ‘moral authority of suffering’ (Lorde, 1997: 294), is deployed to dismiss sex workers’ demands for labour rights as proceeding from atypical and inauthentic positive experiences of the industry.<sup>5</sup> This dynamic was recently apparent in debates around Amnesty International’s draft decriminalisation policy, when the diverse global coalition of sex workers united behind it were depicted as an unrepresentative minority in the international press, compared to the ‘survivors’ spoken for by its opponents (Lewis, 2015; Moran, 2015). The power relations at work in ‘survivor stories’ draw on the long tradition of white feminist empathy which, according to Hemmings (2012: 154), is a way of cannibalising the Other (2012: 154; see also Ahmed, 2012 [2004]; Pedwell, 2012, 2014). In this case however, there is a double-oppression at work: the sex industry

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<sup>5</sup> This often happens regardless of the content of this grassroots politics, much of which does highlight experiences of violence caused by criminalisation. Although, as I will point out later in the paper, the competitive nature of the debate also means that sex workers’ rights activists can be driven to minimise trauma to avoid giving fuel to abolitionists (and in a terrible epistemic injustice, they then become trapped in the designation of their narratives as inauthentic).

survivor is cannibalised by the abolitionist agenda, and her story is also used as political capital to deflect opposition coming from another Other (the sex worker advocating for labour rights). The problematic practice of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991) becomes extra-pernicious in this example, wielded as a weapon against Others who are speaking for themselves.

#### *Rape in trans-exclusionary feminism*

The investment of experience as a form of capital in sex industry debates is to do with ownership of the 'authentic' narrative of selling sex. 'Survivor stories' are used to defeat opponents, principally performing exclusions of sex workers deemed 'not representative' because they are engaged in opposing forms of politics. Another key example of the use of experience to perform exclusions is the politics around trans women's inclusion in women-only space. Here, the rape experience in particular becomes capital, mobilised by trans-exclusionary feminists alongside a construction of trans women as predatory, dangerous, and essentially male. This politics is part hatred and part fear, both of which concern border anxieties and the construction of boundaries between selves and others (Ahmed, 2012 [2004]: 51, 76). Furthermore, as Ahmed argues, hate is used as a defence against injury (2012[2004]: 42-3): in this case, an imagined threat of injury from the trans woman is warded off by the mobilisation of another injury, the experience of being raped by a cisgender man.

In her book *Excluded* (2013), Julia Serano describes being interviewed by a graduate student visiting Camp Trans, the yearly demonstration and event by trans women and allies protesting the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's policy of 'womyn-only space'. It was only a matter of time, Serano writes, before the line of questioning arrived at the 'penis issue' (2013: 30). At this point, she recalls, the student's partner 'burst out with questions of her own':

While there were several of us being interviewed, she turned directly to me, and in a terse and condescending tone of voice, said: "How dare you! You have no idea what many of these women have been through. Don't you understand that many of them are abuse survivors who could be triggered by you? Can't you see why some women might not feel safe having you and your penis around?" (Serano, 2013: 31).

This outburst encapsulates perfectly how trans-exclusionary feminism deploys the experience of rape. In the example above, others are spoken for: however, trans-exclusionary feminists often also speak for themselves, through heartfelt personal disclosures. The trans woman is evoked indirectly through statements about the healing value of 'female-only space' (Hewitt, 2015), or directly through discussion of survivors' emotional triggers in relation to her body (see Kellaway, 2015; Zanin 2013). The penis is the key object here, 'stuck' to trans women through an invasive and violent obsession with their surgical status, but also imagined as a separate entity which is itself responsible for sexual violence rather than being, as Serano reminds us, merely someone's genital organ (2013: 31).

The idea of the penis as weapon was central to 1970s and 80s radical feminism (see for example MacKinnon, 1989: 173). However, any useful sociological and political insights here about the co-constitution of masculinity and violence and the symbolic threat of the phallus appear to have been consumed by the debate over trans-inclusion and converted into a biologically essentialist preoccupation with this particular organ (which is always already coded as violence). The trans woman is automatically

assigned with this organ (and thereby with violence), through the obsession with whether she has one or not. In 2014, a group of UK-based radical feminists started the Twitter hashtag #nounexpectedpenises (no unexpected penises), during a trans-inclusion debate on social media. Narratives such as *'wanked ON at a Primal Scream gig. Didn't realise until we found the evidence on the back of our jeans'* were situated alongside declarations such as *'we want some time away from anyone with a penis.'* One statement read: *'I've had men rub their erect penises against me on the tube...But apparently if I say I don't want a penis around me I am a bigot. Fuck. That.'* The discussion reached its pinnacle in the question, *'Do people really not see that telling lesbians "trans women are women" is promoting rape culture?'*

These narratives worked on multiple levels: deploying the rape experience as capital and constructing trans women as sexual predators through mobilising the 'sticky associations' (Ahmed, 2012 [2004]: 76) between the trans woman and the penis<sup>6</sup>, the penis and sexual violence. The use of the adjective 'unexpected' also illustrates Ahmed's point about how bodies which threaten to 'pass' can be especially fetishised as objects of fear (2012[2004]: 79). Furthermore, the phrase 'no unexpected penises' evokes an organ with a life of its own, whose threat partly resides in the fact that it is not possible to tell whether it is there or not (perchance, like the stranger rapist, it might jump out from the darkness). This politics of fear uses the language of victimisation and emotional triggers to great effect (or affect). However, while valid, painful and real, triggers vary extensively and can sometimes be obscure (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 2014), meaning they are not an adequate basis for policy and politics. Nevertheless, the rape experience is capitalised upon in order to put the surrounding politics beyond dispute: indeed, challenges to trans-exclusionary perspectives are often reinterpreted as a denial or politicisation of the rape experience (see for example Pennington 2015), as though the latter has not already occurred. The claim to 'ownership' of rape victimisation by cisgender women, through the projection of violence on to trans women, further commodifies it and invisibilises the experiences of trans women who have been subjected to violence and abuse.

#### My personal is *more* political: experience without structure

In both the case studies above, experience is a form of capital invested to generate feeling and make political gains. This politics is quintessentially neoliberal, abstracting experience from its social context and deploying it in a competitive discursive arena in which historical dynamics, social contexts and structural power relations are obscured. For example, the dialectic between oppression and empowerment which plays out over the 'authentic' experience of the sex industry fails to acknowledge the ways in which repressive immigration policies and criminal justice systems produce particular personal narratives, and the location of commercial sexualities in a post-Fordist capitalist system with a service-based consumer culture, high unemployment and shrinking social welfare. In the theatre of testimony, the figure of the victimised sex worker who must be rescued via criminal law upstages data on the links between criminalisation and police and community harassment, susceptibility to infectious diseases, risk of violence and access to health and social services (see for example Krüsi et al, 2014; Levy 2015). In the emotive politics of fear

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, many trans women choose not to undergo genital surgery, which in no way invalidates their womanhood: the point here is that the assignment of the trans woman with a penis is used to construct her as a threat.

which aims to exclude trans women from women's spaces and services, disclosures of cisgender women's traumatic experiences prevent discussion of their privilege relative to trans women. This also gives no space to engage with the fact that trans women are particularly vulnerable to multiple violences, including domestic and sexual victimisation, and thus especially in need of non-judgmental support services (Whittle et al, 2007; Roch et al, 2010; National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2014).

In a competitive market, all experiences are equal: this reinforces the advantage of those who already have access to platforms (see also Ahmed, 2012[2004]: p33), while masking their structural power. Indeed, there have recently been numerous examples from both the UK and North America, of privileged people successfully capitalising upon narratives of marginality in response to the politics and claims of oppressed groups. Within feminist publics, academics and journalists with considerable institutional and media clout have echoed the refrain of the religious and libertarian Right in presenting themselves as victims of silencing and bullying by special interests and 'political correctness', in response to sex workers' and trans people's demands for rights and space (see for example Observer, 2015; Pollitt, 2015; Murphy, 2014; Glosswitch, 2014). Intra-feminist altercations are nothing new: and for Audre Lorde (1997), defensiveness is an essential element of the power dynamics within the movement. However, the current context, with its abstraction of experience from structure, may facilitate the ability of privileged people to gain political advantage through wielding defensive personal narratives.

As the social and structural retreats, the relationships between experiences and political agendas instead begin to define them. Sex industry 'survivors' have their stories validated by the powerful forces which co-opt them, but can be depicted at the grassroots as coached by abolitionists into exaggerating their trauma.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, sex workers who advocate for labour rights are seen by much of mainstream feminism as having been duped by patriarchy into accepting their profession (Levy, 2015: 47). This echoes the ways in which Muslim and ex-Muslim women who speak out about gendered oppression can be defined as imperialist 'stooges', while feminists working within a religious framework and declaring attachments to Islam are diagnosed with false consciousness (Phipps, 2014; Kandiyoti, 2015).

These dynamics also flatten out lived realities so they cannot be appropriated by the other side. If experience is capital it can only be invested in particular currencies, which polarises narratives and suppresses the possibilities in between. Those with differing experiences of the same phenomenon are unable to co-exist, and there is also little space within the individual for mixed or ambivalent feelings to endure. For example, in much the same way as the complexities of ending a pregnancy may be underplayed by pro-choice individuals and groups wary of reinforcing pro-life agendas (Hess, 2013; Lyon, 2014; Webster, 2015), sex workers admit that they may de-emphasise, hide or even deny difficult experiences in resistance to the radical feminist definition of their work as abuse (Ray, 2012; Suzyhooker, 2013; Crow, 2015). Scott argues that politics based on experience has always had a tendency to essentialism, being concerned with difference and not the conditions which produce it

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<sup>7</sup> My evidence for this comes from a number of statements which have been made about prominent sex industry survivors who support abolitionist politics; some of these are available online but I will not provide references as they contain personal details and allegations about these individuals.

(1991; see also Mohanty, 2013). Furthermore, in a context such as the one I have described, it seems there is a deliberate homogenisation of narrative in order to compete.

Of course, there is no pure experience unmarked by the political (Scott, 1991). However, this competitive arena, like the neoliberal context, is both suffused with emotion and rather callous: often, the first response to experiential narratives is ‘whose side are you on?’ We then frequently discredit the experience, when we should critique the associated politics. Pedwell (2012, 2014) highlights how empathy is mobilised to support dominant economic, political, cultural and social relations, and it is certainly the case that the use of ‘survivor stories’ in sex industry abolitionism and the rape experience in trans-exclusionary feminism aim to evoke an empathic response. However, another key factor here is that empathy is being withheld. This happens on all sides, but is especially harmful to the already marginalised: the trans women, and the sex workers who advocate for labour rights, in the case studies above. We are asked to listen to ‘survivors’: those who have exited the sex industry, and those whose emotional triggers cause them to fear trans women's inclusion in women-only space. Yet the designation ‘survivor’, and its associated claim on empathy, is withheld from the Others - dismissing their realities and invisibilising their experiences of violence and abuse. The operation of experience as a form of capital, then, creates *selective empathies* granted only to those whose narratives have political use value.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

This does not mean, of course, that we should not theorise from experience; indeed, the ‘view from nowhere’ with its attendant ‘voice of reason’ can also be that of the oppressor and reeks of entitlement and privilege (I say this with an awareness that in writing this piece, I may reasonably be read that way myself). We must remain cognisant of the value of sharing our realities, in both personal and political arenas (Hemmings, 2012; Mazanderani et al, 2013). However, if we could name and resist the commodification of experience, with its associated polarisation and selective empathies, we might begin to articulate a politics which respects varied realities whilst allowing us to disagree. The idea of identity groups as coalitions of ‘heterogeneous commonality’ (Hill Collins, 1998: 224, see also Crenshaw, 1991; Carastathis, 2013), which characterised early attempts to theorise and use intersectionality, is useful here. To connect across difference is messy and painful, a process which must be continually made and remade (Calderon et al, 2012). Those of us with socioeconomic and cultural privilege must be prepared to surrender to this, owning the fact that the dominant may be fearful of the mess which signifies a loss of control. The privileged must also give up the practice of ‘speaking for’, and make sensible use of what Alcoff calls the ‘retreat response’ (1991: 17): when the goal is mutual understanding ‘speaking with’ may be in order, but we also need to challenge ourselves, especially on public platforms, to ‘move over and get out of the way’ (Alcoff, 1991: 8).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is linked to Berlant’s analysis of the relation between compassion and sadism (2004: 9-11), but appears to be a deliberate, rather than an instinctive or conditioned, turning away (although it may incorporate both these reactions).

<sup>9</sup> Note that Alcoff herself does not necessarily endorse this approach.

To use experience as capital is to misunderstand standpoint epistemology and assume that women's experiences automatically equal feminist politics (see also Scott, 1991: 787; Hemmings, 2012: 156). In fact, experience must be grounded in an understanding of structural conditions in order to produce an emancipatory commitment (Brewer, 2011; Hemmings, 2012; Nash, 2011). Some contemporary feminist forms of knowledge-making exemplify this: for instance, the social movement organising of women of colour which melds issues of identity with socioeconomic analysis (Chun, 2013: 923), and the sex workers' labour rights activism which documents the harms of criminalisation through linking experiences of oppression with specific laws and practices (see for example Mensah and Bruckert, 2012; Nine, 2012; Levy, 2013; Feministfire, 2015). These politics filter experience through intersectional analyses of power, in contrast to its deployment in my case studies, by those *in power* to reinforce the status quo.

I conclude with the acknowledgement that all experiences are valid, and with a reminder that they are also asymmetrically situated. The injuries felt by those who are more privileged, while certainly painful, are not commensurate with the experience of oppression.<sup>10</sup> Ventriloquising another's personal story is an act of power, especially when the oppression of this Other is wielded against another Other with whom one disagrees. Disclosing one's experience of violence in a bid to construct and exclude the Other is violence in itself. Especially when personal stories become capital in political debates, they must be understood in relation to dynamics of privilege and marginality; these also grant the advantaged few more access to narrative platforms than the rest. There is a fine line to walk here: between engaging in selective empathies, and situating experiences structurally/appraising the uses to which they are put. Mindful of this, we must nevertheless ask whose personal becomes *more* political, and why.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, an intersectional analysis allows that one may experience marginality and privilege on different axes: however, this does not mean that all social locations (and all experiences) are equivalent.

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