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# Defining My Own Oppression: Neoliberalism and the Demands of Victimhood

*Chi Chi Shi*

Independent Researcher

*chichishi@outlook.com*

## Abstract

In this article I explore a central paradox of contemporary identity politics: why do we look for recognition from the very institutions we reject as oppressive? I argue that neoliberalism's continued assault on the bases for collectivity has led to a suspicion that 'the collective' is an essentialising concept. The assault on the collective coupled with the neoliberal imperative to create an 'authentic' self has led to trauma and victimhood becoming the only bases on which people can unite. This manifests discursively and theoretically in the primary trope of contemporary activism: 'intersectionality'. Mobilising around this analytical concept has led to an analysis of oppression that, even as it claims to be systemic, is totally dematerialised and relentlessly individualised. Instead of building collective power, we are left with a politics of individual demand coming from a coalition of dispersed subject positions.

## Keywords

neoliberalism – identity – intersectionality – privilege – trauma – recognition

In this article I will explore a central paradox of contemporary identity politics: why do we look for recognition from the very institutions we reject as oppressive? I argue that neoliberalism's continued assault on the bases for collectivity has led to a suspicion concerning the concept of 'the collective' as a forced imposition of essentialism. Following Wendy Brown's theorisation of 'suffer-mongering' as a characteristic of identity politics, I posit that the assault on the collective coupled with the neoliberal imperative to confess and create an 'authentic' self has led to trauma and victimhood becoming the

only bases on which people can unite. I will demonstrate how this manifests discursively in the primary trope of contemporary identity politics: ‘intersectionality’. Mobilising around this analytical concept has led to an analysis of oppression that, even as it claims to be systemic, is totally dematerialised and relentlessly individualised. I contend that, because this language frames systemic injustice through its effects on individuals, there is a moralising impulse in this discourse which leads to a rejection of power. Instead of mobilising to build collective power, we are left with a politics of individual demand coming from a coalition of dispersed subject positions. Thus, while there is a refusal to engage with institutional structures on the part of ‘radical’ activists, the demobilising and inward-looking reification of victimhood provides no coherent vision for creating a desirable future, beyond the universal recognition of suffering. Not only does this reorient the subject towards the logic of neoliberalism as being somehow unassailable, but it effectively reduces resistance to the placing of demands on the very institutions it rejects. I will conclude by suggesting ways to move beyond the one-sided conservatism of recognising victimhood and to recover the importance of collective-building as a creative endeavour of human agency.

## Introduction

Identity politics has come to the fore as the dominant battleground of contemporary Left politics. However, what is meant by ‘identity politics’ is often poorly defined and politically contentious. I contend that the meanings and uses of identity politics have shifted from the New Social Movement era, which has led to a theoretical confusion as to how we understand identity-based organising. On the one hand, the concept of ‘identity politics’ has been tarred with the brush of essentialism, particularism and cultural determinism.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen as an acknowledgement of the failures of identity politics movements to be attentive of intragroup difference, thereby unwittingly reproducing structures of dominance within the movements themselves. On the other hand, identity as ‘experience’ has become a commonly accepted litmus test for political legitimacy in activist circles; it is a commonly accepted claim on the Left that the oppressed have a better understanding of reality because it is grounded in their identities, in their experience of oppression. Paradoxically, the simultaneous prevalence of these two seemingly opposed claims has

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<sup>1</sup> Alcoff 2000.

resulted in a confused terrain, where 'identity politics' is derided even as the central political importance of identity is affirmed.

One moment which demonstrates the contradictions and tensions in the present terrain of identity politics is the confrontation between Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists and Hillary Clinton during Clinton's Democratic presidential candidacy campaign. The incident in New Hampshire led to a conversation between the two BLM activists and Clinton. The activists challenge Clinton over her role in mass-incarceration policies and the War on Drugs, wishing to hold her responsible for the damage inflicted on Black communities. Daunasia Yancey, one of the activists, describes their purpose as seeking 'a personal reflection on her responsibility for being part of the cause of this problem.'<sup>2</sup> The moment was caught on camera and quickly disseminated widely online. The questions asked by the BLM activists, as well as the framing of the entire incident, showcase many of the tensions that I wish to explore. Consider, in particular, the following statements:

Question: 'what in your *heart* has changed that's going to change the direction of this country ... How do you actually *feel* that's different than you did before?' [emphasis added].

Question: '... you don't tell black people what we need to know. And we won't tell you all what you need to do.'

Hillary Clinton: 'I'm not telling you – I'm just telling you to tell me.'

Question: 'What I mean to say is – this is and has always been a white problem of violence. It's not – there's not much that we can do to stop the violence against us.'<sup>3</sup>

In this exchange, it appears that the BLM activists wish to dissociate themselves from institutional politics. When asked by Hillary Clinton what policies they would like to see, the BLM activists refute the question: 'we won't tell you all what you need to do'. Clearly, they do not believe that their role is to suggest institutional solutions, and they are seeking to distance themselves from the 'white problem of violence'. This exemplifies a current tendency in Left politics that wants to dissociate and distance oppressed subjects from power and institutions. Paradoxically, the power of the oppressed is seen to come from their abjection. This leads to a model of resistance that is suspicious of organising around an objective, and is instead based on moments of rupture which disrupt the existing regime. This maps onto a conception of identity as

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<sup>2</sup> Daunasia Yancey, quoted in Tesfaye 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

an imposition upon the subject as a mark of power, and a conception of powerlessness as political virtue.

However, this conception of identity is at odds with the second theoretical strand of identity politics, which emphasises affective and experiential accounts of oppression. The BLM activists asking Clinton to look into her heart and express her feelings is an example of how the psychic dimension of recognition permeates the language of the Left. Co-existing with the rejection of institutional politics and distancing oppression from power, this tendency sees that the oppressed seek affective recognition from institutions and those in positions of power. It is notable that the BLM questioning of Clinton frames their intervention in an interpersonal register. This dimension of resistance-movements seeks the recognition and visibility of their specific identity, but furthermore, this identity is formulated in affective terms. Specifically, what is purported to be made visible are the identities of oppressed and oppressor. While the BLM activists refrained from suggesting specific policies or even targets to Clinton, they ask instead for 'reflection': 'how can those mistakes that you made be lessons for all America for a moment of reflection on how we treat black people in this country?'<sup>4</sup> The underlying supposition in this instance is that making oppression visible will somehow lessen it. This fits into a 'call-out culture' model of politics, in which the favoured response to oppressive behaviours is to challenge people on their positionality and lack of insight into the experiences of others. There is a focus on analysing interpersonal dynamics and the lived, everyday effects of systems of oppression.

In this article, I will first briefly examine the logic and implications of the advent of neoliberalism. I will argue that the pressures of individualisation produced by neoliberalism have created a political climate where the demand for emancipation sounds as a demand to de-stigmatise and make visible oppressed identities. This will be explored through the framework of 'intersectionality', as the new face of identity politics. The atomisation of political struggle and the pressures placed upon our understanding of collective action have formed a space where the prevalence of individual trauma becomes the only way of conceiving of commonality. In order to move beyond this, it is necessary to resurrect the political salience of the collective as an intentional construction. In this way, we can again conceive of collective solidarity as a product of human agency as opposed to the product of being acted-upon by structures of domination.

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4 Ibid.

## I

The political economy of neoliberalism is informed by the Chicago School economics of a radically free market. It has been described as the colonisation of every aspect of life by market values; in this, it presupposes that the logic of capital is already universal.<sup>5</sup> Classical liberalism assumed a certain natural logic to capitalist economics, considering the emergence of the market as spontaneous, based on the natural tendency to 'barter, truck and exchange'.<sup>6</sup> It was broadly concerned with limits in the context of 'natural laws'; 'natural laws that make man what he "naturally" is and which must serve as limits on state activity; economic laws, equally "natural", which must circumscribe and regulate political decisions.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, in classical liberalism, there existed a gap between civil society and economy, whereby the values of equality and freedom functioned antagonistically; this can be seen in the heterogeneous critiques and divergent strains of liberalism in the nineteenth century.

The eventual emergence of neoliberalism, according to Dardot and Laval, arose from a crisis of liberal governmentality that was unable to confront, without changing form, organisational changes in capitalism. It was 'a crisis that essentially posed the practical problem of political intervention in economic and social affairs and its doctrinal justification'.<sup>8</sup> Neoliberalism's break with liberalism is in the move from the logic of market-exchange to that of market-competition. The classical conception of market, as based on the natural impulse to exchange, becomes the conception of economic competition, for which the market must be constructed to allow.<sup>9</sup> This extends far beyond the economic. The logic of neoliberalism sees that capitalism entails permanent economic flux, underpinned by competition; this requires an adaptation of human nature. It necessitates an internalisation on both the individual and the collective level of competition and enterprise as a model for behaviour: 'neoliberal rationality encourages the ego to act to strengthen itself so as to survive competition'.<sup>10</sup>

As such, neoliberalism cannot simply be understood as political economy, but as a type of society and as a mode of governing. Following Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' as 'the conduct of conducts', or governing people's conduct through state apparatuses, neoliberalism has sought to transform

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5 Read 2010, p. 2.

6 Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 22.

7 Ibid.

8 Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 28.

9 Read 2010.

10 Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 292.

subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> It has brought about new relationships with the self while, simultaneously, reconfiguring the form of capitalism. Far from being the retreat of the state, or the colonisation of the state by the market, neoliberalism functions through state-led strategies that seek to produce subjects of self-interest, to create subjects that are oriented towards the market. As Lemke notes, neoliberalism purposely constructs the very economy that it ideologically supposes already exists, fostering relations of competition while simultaneously posing competition as the basis of social relations.<sup>12</sup>

Neoliberalism seeks to close the gap 'between moral and political principles on the one hand and the economic order on the other'.<sup>13</sup> It seeks to place a moral value upon economic relations; competition is not just an economic necessity but a moral imperative. Social bonds and collective securities are seen as impediments to competition, and social protection is destructive of the values which capitalism now needs in order to function. As such, neoliberalism calls into question 'any and all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market'.<sup>14</sup> This is the background for the atomisation of the workforce and the assault on unions, and any other impediment to individual competition. The post-Fordist economy, with its emphasis on flexibility, multi-tasking, sub-contracting, etc., is bolstered by the dismantling of the welfare state and the accompanying moral imperative to work. The privatisation of collective resources is combined with a moralising, ideological attack on state protections that frames security as a barrier to self-management, innovation and wealth creation.

Simultaneously, the network structure of post-Fordist capitalism is one which effects the internalisation of control in employees, demanding continuous self-improvement as self-investment. The remaking of the subject as one of enterprise, the universal entrepreneur, seeks to collapse the distinction between capitalist and worker; between businessman and citizen. Workers are rebranded as 'human capital', and own themselves as assets, each responsible for their own worth. This is encapsulated in the concept of 'skill', which conflates the qualities of a person with their labour-power.<sup>15</sup> Measures like the individualisation of workers' routines and the utilisation of performance-pay schemes on the part of employers attack the collectivism of unions that

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11 Foucault 1982.

12 Lemke 2007, p. 203.

13 Read 2010, p. 46.

14 Bourdieu 1998.

15 Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, p. 155.

historically have improved collective conditions, and treat each individual worker as a sub-contractor.

Comprehending neoliberalism as a rationality that structures subject formation is imperative to understanding the current way that identity is mobilised, and the depoliticising effects of the inadvertent correlation between the logic of contemporary identity politics and neoliberal techniques of governmentality. Neoliberalism constitutes an assault on collective solidarity, transforming the economic, political and cultural bases on which people unite. In doing so, it personalises the causes of suffering into individual trauma, which can in turn be self-managed.<sup>16</sup> The personalisation of work and political attacks on unions are an assault on the economic bases for collective action, while the emphasis upon marketising the self and the importance of a unique, authentic, individual identity weakens the foundations for understanding collective experience.

I argue that neoliberalism, in its attempts to destroy the basis for collectivity, provides the basis on which movements privilege individuality. Reflected in the theory and practice of contemporary identity politics is a depoliticisation of struggle which frames oppression as subjective and individual. The discursive shifts enacted in the language of identity politics evince the shifting assumptions concerning the boundaries of possibility. In general terms, the primary shift has been from language that signals collective and structural issues, to language which privileges individual behaviours and emphasises difference. Even though it is stressed that oppression is 'systemic', it is the effects of oppression that are focused upon. This is divorced from an analysis of *why* systems such as racism and patriarchy exist. The problem with this reading is that focusing on the victims of misrecognition often overshadows analysis of the causes of misrecognition.<sup>17</sup> This takes place in a framework which valorises powerlessness, placing denigrated identities within a moral register. It attempts to coalesce suffering into a political programme, while encouraging a politics of guilt which equates self-flagellation with transformation.

## II

If neoliberal rationality breeds an obsession with the self, this is reflected in the direction of contemporary identity politics. The shifts in the way that 'identity politics' is utilised reflect the perceived failings of collective politics. Identity

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16 Neocleous 2012.

17 Markell 2003.

politics first described movements for the liberation of specific groups on the basis of an oppressed social identity. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Women's Liberation, LGBT and the Black Civil Rights movements all mobilised on the basis of group-specific injustice. According to Nancy Fraser, this marked a shift in the 'grammar of political claims-making' from the economic to the cultural.<sup>18</sup> However, the origins of identity politics were not opposed to socialism. Indeed, these New Left groups were initiated in response to the crude, reductionist class-politics of the Old Left, but formed within the tradition of socialist organising. They simply denied the white, male worker as the universal subject, and his condition as universal.

This politicisation of identity was a response to the material consequences of its historical formations, and as a forced imposition that stems from exploitation and subjugation. Black Liberation groups struggled 'against the alienation and one-sidedness of blackness', while Women's Liberation groups 'struggled for reproductive and sexual freedom in an effort to gain control over the means of production (their bodies)'.<sup>19</sup> Here, identity was treated as a political relation. However, the frequent exclusion of black women from these movements showed the tendency to essentialise a particular experience of blackness or womanhood that posed the interests of black men and white women as constitutive of the identities of 'black' and 'women'. Black feminists organised in response to these antagonisms and the 'one-dimensional perspective' often taken to be the whole. Prominent activist and academic bell hooks writes that 'white women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Nor are they aware of the extent to which their perspectives reflect race and class biases'.<sup>20</sup> She points to the fallacy of comparing the oppression of black people to the oppression of women: 'This implies that all women are White and all Blacks are men.'<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the particular coinage of 'identity politics' is attributed to the Combahee River Collective (CRC), a group of black feminists, in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> They describe it thus: 'This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.'<sup>23</sup> However, the CRC did not

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18 Fraser 1997.

19 Mitchell 2013.

20 hooks 2015, p. 3.

21 hooks 1990, p. 7.

22 Breines 2006.

23 The Combahee River Collective 1977.



intend a separatist politics, but can be understood as embedded within the logic of universal emancipation in the context of anti-imperialist struggle. The wave of anti-colonial movements in the Third World, and the influence of non-Western thinkers, deeply informed socialist understandings of internationalism and the relationship between particular forms of oppression and universal emancipation, as captured by the sentiment that ‘while fighting for the interests of our people, we also fight for those of the peoples of the entire world’.<sup>24</sup> This logic was behind the CRC’s iteration of identity politics, which understood itself to be fighting for liberation from the particular systems that denied their full potential as human beings: ‘We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.’<sup>25</sup>

Today, this theoretical framework is often seen as constituting the roots of ‘intersectionality’. Intersectional identity politics is a response to the reductionism of so-called ‘single issue’ identity politics movements, which exclude the complexities of multiple oppressions and identities. This is most often located in the intersection of race and gender, and the exclusion of black women from anti-racism and feminist frameworks. However, it would be mistaken to presume that contemporary frameworks are historically coherent. While the concept of intersectionality clearly does share roots with the approach epitomised by the CRC, it has evolved into a particular set of politics which are, in many important ways, divergent from the politics practised by the CRC and the activists who are claimed as intersectionality’s forebears.

I posit that contemporary identity politics centres around recognition and the interpersonal dynamics of oppression, as epitomised in the framework of ‘intersectionality’. As such, identity has become tied to the discourse of authenticity and disentangled from the material basis on which it is formed. By moving away from thinking about the root cause of particular oppressions, identity politics becomes an end in itself, where what is sought is the affirmation of denigrated identities. This has allowed for the mainstreaming of elements of identity politics discourse in a collision with neoliberal rationality. Intersectionality has become the dominant framework through which identity is imagined, not only in activist circles, but by NGOs and government institutions.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while, superficially, intersectionality discourse reads as a rejection of coherent, essentialist conceptions of identity, in practice it has multiplied identities without challenging the essentialism of identity

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24 Mohandesi 2016.

25 The Combahee River Collective 1977.

26 Davis 2008.

categories. As such, the intersectionality framework centres the affirmation of identity without troubling what is being affirmed.

### III

The term 'intersectionality' was first used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term to describe the specific discrimination faced by black women in employment law. Black women were not served by anti-discrimination legislation designed to protect black people, nor by legislation protecting women. She details case-studies of black women whose experiences consistently fall into the margins. Crenshaw's essay has been hugely influential in shaping the direction of the new iteration of identity politics. While it was intended as a critique of identity politics, it did not intend to trouble the politicisation of identity; rather, it is the unsophisticated formations of identity categories that must be challenged. She argues that, 'The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference ... but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.'<sup>27</sup>

This acknowledgment of difference is undoubtedly valid. Black people are never simply 'black', and women are never simply 'women'. The lens of intersectionality offers a way to see social identities as mutually-constituting processes that do not exist independently from one another. The problem with Crenshaw's conception, however, is that it has no way of explaining the existence of oppression. Discrimination simply appears to happen to particular groups of individuals. This is evident in her famous metaphor of traffic to explain the intersection of oppressions:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.<sup>28</sup>

It appears from this metaphor as though black women are merely caught up in gender and race discrimination; identity appears as an imposition of power, as questions of subjectivity are side-lined. Identities are dehistoricised and

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<sup>27</sup> Crenshaw 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Crenshaw 1989.

naturalised as the identity-categories of 'women' and 'black' appear as accidental traits, akin to hair colour or eye colour. Crenshaw argues for 'the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed', conceiving of identity as something that pre-exists the construction of the social world.<sup>29</sup>

The conception of identity that is prevalent in intersectionality discourse today has all but severed the material connection between identity-categories and the capitalist means of production. Intersectionality, as the structural intersections of inequalities, emphasises the 'infinitely multiple substantive social locations, generates a long list of important intersectional locations to be studied and offers voice to the perspectives of many marginalized groups'.<sup>30</sup> There is a discursive focus on the multiple differences between groups, but this framing does not demand an analysis of systems of exclusion beyond their naming. Thus, the tendency of intersectionality discourse is towards locating identity in purely cultural terms, flattening-out the different *functions* of race, class and gender so that they all appear as static, timeless descriptors of identity, rather than as dynamic categories which are actively shaped by oppression and the needs of capital. Without this, identity and oppression can only appear as interpersonal discrimination; if there is no explanatory schema for why racism and sexism serve particular functions, they can only be pathologised as undesirable traits.

I argue that the discourse of 'intersectionality' reflects the theoretical tensions in the current conception of identity politics. It both conceives of identity as an imposition upon the subject as a mark of power, and follows a conception of powerlessness as political virtue, seeking recognition on the basis of imposed, essentialised identities. This understanding is grounded by a shift away from the understanding of universal liberation still evident in the identity politics of the CRC, coinciding with the neoliberal impetus of individual competition. This can be seen through Crenshaw's analogy of the basement. In this example, she imagines of a basement in which all disadvantaged people are contained. The most disadvantaged people are on the floor of the basement, while those with less disadvantage are stacked on top of them, 'feet on shoulders', until those disadvantaged by only one factor are brushing the ceiling. Above the ceiling, on the floor above, are those with no disadvantages. This metaphor introduces an additive conception of oppression, whereby oppressions are 'stacked'. In Crenshaw's analogy, those at the top, the least-disadvantaged, can crawl through the ceiling onto the floor above, 'due to the

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29 Crenshaw 1991, p. 1245.

30 Ferree 2009.

singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position.<sup>31</sup> This is to conceive of power as functioning through interchangeable and interpersonal discrimination, which can be accumulated one atop the other. However, social powers differ in both form and function. They are not just oppressive, but productive of subjects ‘through complex and often fragmented histories in which multiple social powers are regulated through and against one another.’<sup>32</sup>

Conceiving of oppressions as additive in the way that Crenshaw does is also to conceive of the oppressed as competing, as standing on top of one another to reach the top. ‘Privileged’, singularly discriminated subjects are individually admitted by crawling through a hatch opened by those on the top floor. As such, this is a vision where solidarity amongst the oppressed is impossible, because it is a relationship of competition between differently-discriminated people, won by those who have the most in common with the unoppressed. That the structure of discrimination can be overcome through an invitation to crawl through the hatch from those above reaffirms the power of the existing structures to control inclusion. This is a politics of demand which depoliticises conflict; gains are not seen as won or taken, but asked for and given.

#### IV

This can be placed in context of Wendy Brown’s critique of the ‘wounded attachments’ of modern subjects. Brown critiques the politics of suffering, using Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* to argue that people today have lost their desire for freedom and are bound to their oppression. *Ressentiment* is the ‘triumph of the weak as weak’, a moralising revenge of the powerless that seeks to cast suffering as the measure of social virtue, and strength and privilege as immoral. It is the obverse of the object, reversing the logic of domination but keeping this logic intact. *Ressentiment* serves a triple function: ‘it produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; it produces a culprit responsible for the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt as the sufferer has been hurt).’<sup>33</sup> The tensions within liberalism are responsible for the desire of politicised identity to foreclose its own freedom. Liberal subjects, situated and produced by power, are denied the understanding of this fact by liberal discourse which pushes the notion of

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31 Crenshaw 1989.

32 Brown 2002, p. 427.

33 Brown 1995, p. 68.

the free, antecedent 'I' which precedes socialisation and is free to fashion itself. Thus the liberal subject is doomed to a failure which it seeks to externalise.<sup>34</sup>

Brown argues that the prevalence of politicised identities is partly the result of a renaturalisation of capitalism that has come from the demise of a critique of capitalism.<sup>35</sup> Eva Mitchell explains how 'identity' can be equated with alienated labour; it is a one-sided expression of our total potential as human beings.<sup>36</sup> In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes that the distribution of labour shoehorns every person into 'a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape'.<sup>37</sup> In consumer capitalism, disciplinary productions fashion and regulate subjects through classifying social behaviours as social positions. To seek liberation on the basis of identity merely reifies and reaffirms this distribution.

For Brown, identity politics is partly a manifestation of class resentment, whereby the alienation and injury caused by capitalism becomes depoliticised and displaced onto markers of social difference.<sup>38</sup> Economic and political causes of suffering are expressed in a cultural register. Thus, no matter how sophisticated the understanding of identity, politicising identity is a metaphysical mistake: identity should be the starting-point, rather than the object of forming collectivities. In this conception, we must be liberated from identity. Politicised identity is a reaction to and effect of domination and a self-affirmation which reinscribes powerlessness. Brown argues that the 'language of recognition becomes the language of unfreedom ... articulation in language, in the context of liberal and disciplinary discourse, becomes a vehicle of subordination through individualization, normalization and regulation, even as it strives to produce visibility and acceptance'.<sup>39</sup>

Building on this critique, and without discounting the woundedness and suffering that often form the lived embodied effects of oppression, I contend that the contemporary turn to trauma and suffering is both a function of neoliberalism and a reaction to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has worked to destroy the material basis for collective existence and has relentlessly individualised suffering. By defining identity through psychic suffering, this lack can be marketised through discourses of self-help, resilience and recovery which increasingly commodify the self. It is my contention that politicising identity by associating trauma with identity is an attempt to found a new basis

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Mitchell 2013.

37 Marx and Engels 2004, p. 53.

38 Brown 1995.

39 Brown 1995, p. 66.

for collectivity. This can be seen in the example of 'classism' and the concept of privilege, which indicate a framework in which systemic analysis is reduced to personal affects. These discourses often function through demanding inward reflection upon one's own positionality within systems of oppression, focusing on individual lived experience. Because the effects of domination are personalised in affective terms, the reification of trauma and victimhood means that resistance to fighting symptoms is prioritised over systemic analysis.

## V

The existence of capital is informed by a continuous confrontation between accumulation and legitimacy. Capitalism has survived, partly, through the absorption of critique.<sup>40</sup> The spirit of capitalism is the backbone of accumulation, which both places limits upon legitimate accumulation and is able to disarm potentially dangerous critique. In many ways, the radical challenge of identity politics has been disarmed and subsumed under neoliberalism's valorisation of individual difference. Without an explanatory theory for identity, identities appear as ready-made, crystallised facsimiles of social struggle. Divorced from the material history of identity, identity politics becomes complicit with diversifying capitalism.

This is exemplified by the calls to end 'classism' as discrimination against working-class people, a misguided attempt at understanding how relations of domination function through class. 'Classism' is a symptom of a capitalist society which relies upon class exploitation. Focusing on the cultural effects of identity leads to a dematerialised analysis which cannot understand the class system as necessitated by the exploitation of labour, rather than in terms of a denigrated identity which must be liberated. This is contextualised within the social and political logic of neoliberalism which treats the market forces of capitalism as inevitable and unassailable. The prevalence of discursive shifts towards framing oppression in terms of prejudice and stigma, which the language of classism epitomises, is part of this naturalisation. This decouples oppression from a useful systemic analysis which acknowledges the crucial systemic function that oppression plays. In turn, this naturalises systems of oppression. Classism is the most obvious example of this. In this analysis, poor and working-class people suffer because of the attitudes of middle and ruling-class people towards them, rather than because they are exploited by capitalist modes of production. Wealth- and income-inequality is attributed to

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40 Boltanski and Chiapello 2006.

prejudice: 'classism is differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It's the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.'<sup>41</sup>

The organisation Class Action has as its tagline 'Building Bridges Across the Class Divide', locating class discrimination in interpersonal relationships that stem from systemic patterns of prejudice. Instead of abolishing class relations, classism emphasises the mitigation of the individual effects of the class relationship, for example, 'feelings of inferiority to higher-class people'. Instead of seeking to dismantle the capitalist class-system, Class Action emphasises recognition of the suffering caused by interpersonal relations as a solution to inequality, flattening the function of race, class and gender by equalising them through the prism of descriptive identity.

I do not dispute that the suffering which marks the lives of oppressed subjects must play a role in resistance to oppression. However, the impulse towards culturalism evidenced in contemporary identity politics leads to resistance being conceived of as an inward turn towards the symptoms of oppression and away from the systemic causes. This turn to the self is embodied in the popularity of privilege theory. Privilege theory is an example of how structural inequalities are located in individual subject-positions. Peggy McIntosh's conception of white privilege is germinal to current understandings. She compiles a list of 50 daily benefits of white privilege: 'I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious.'<sup>42</sup> The concept of personal privilege as 'unearned advantage ... because of prejudice' has become ubiquitous in identity politics discourse.<sup>43</sup> 'Check your privilege' has become a political rallying-cry, suggesting that resistance must begin from acknowledgement of one's own personal positionality within the system.

Again, the systemic effects of oppression are held to be located in the individual. Not only is politics individualised, but it relies on 'new and seemingly progressive ways of centering politics on the white identity'.<sup>44</sup> This reduces solidarity with the oppressed to a politics of guilt, where political agency is replaced with moralism and self-denunciation. Privilege discourse is geared towards individual affect; all individuals are privileged in some way and must accept their privilege: 'the next step is one of simple self-realization: you are

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41 Class Action, n.d.

42 McIntosh 1988.

43 Ibid.

44 Haider 2017.



privileged. ... What you need to realize is that we *all* have privilege to some degree: white privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, etc.<sup>45</sup> Its contemporary popularity is in line with the neoliberal individualism which renders it compatible with systemic injustice; as a programme for action, privilege theory foregrounds change upon the self, rather than upon the world, as resistance is reduced to self-reflection.

Undoubtedly, making visible what the social system renders unseen is important in challenging the lived effects of oppression, and challenging individual effects and attitudes is crucial in the process of collective-building. However, when resistance is held to be located primarily in individual actions and beliefs, the political becomes wholly a question of ethics, leading to a depoliticised politics which seeks justice through interpersonal relations. Racist and patriarchal systems become reduced to racist prejudice and sexist attitudes.

## VI

In accordance with the multiplying of identity-positions in a demand for recognition, intersectionality and privilege discourse tends towards an epistemology of provenance, an 'overly subjectivist theory of knowledge' which assumes that knowledge is group-specific and derived from experience. This is an individualising position: 'since no woman can avoid living a plurality of identities, a central dynamic of identity politics is to move toward ever-shrinking identity groups, for which the logical terminus would have to be not merely subjectivism but solipsism, since no one person's set of experiences is identical to another's.'<sup>46</sup> The right to speak about certain things is tied to one's identity, and that right is denied to non-identical others.<sup>47</sup> There is a privileging of the experience of the excluded, which is taken to be knowledge of systemic exclusion. The conflation of these two logics leads us to assume truth on the basis of suffering. Individualising this logic results in theorising how what an *individual* can see is limited by the system, but it still remains an individual's responsibility to extend recognition. It is only the people who are invisible within the system who can and must show the truth of exclusion.

This is embedded in the oft-heard phrase 'don't speak over my lived experience'. In feminist circles, it is often argued that men should not challenge

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45 Tekanji 2006.

46 Kruks 1995, p. 4.

47 Ibid.



women's interpretations of women's oppression, on the basis that they have not experienced it. For example, a debate on abortion at Oxford University was eventually cancelled when it emerged that the debate would be between two men. The feminist response argued that it was inappropriate to let men discuss abortion because none of the panellists would ever have to consider having an abortion: 'As you can imagine, those of us with uteruses were incredibly angry that they were able to speak for us and over us.'<sup>48</sup> This reliance on experience avoids the necessity of making and defending non-situationalist political claims. It is unfashionable to profess a position that stems from the belief in a universal, but a reliance on experience takes away the necessity of judgement. Without the ability to judge, however, the ability to understand oppression is at stake. This approach signals a descent into solipsism, as the possibility of understanding the experience of others is foregone. Furthermore, oppression is conflated with acting against it. This is what Chandra Mohanty critiques as 'the feminist osmosis thesis', which assumes that women are feminists because of their female experience.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, there are plenty of women who, despite having a uterus, or even an abortion, do not support reproductive rights.

The reification of oppressed identity is mistaken in presuming that being oppressed is a constitutive 'outside' to power. As Donna Haraway shows us, however, 'there is no immediate vision from the standpoints of the subjugated'.<sup>50</sup> The account of vision which presumes clarity from an oppressed standpoint is a reversal of the position it is critiquing. It is a reaction against the presumption that vision is natural, that its determination is unsituated and universal. This is the position traditionally imputed to the 'unmarked' white male; the universalisation of the perspective of the privileged. However, presuming truth from the position of the oppressed still enacts a division as to what can be seen and experienced, and what cannot; there is 'a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions'.<sup>51</sup> Haraway stresses that all experiences are mediated and all mediations are affected by power, how 'not all perspectives are equally valid in the struggle against domination: simply "being" of an oppressed or marginalized group does not automatically give one a privilege in formulating truth'.<sup>52</sup>

The trend to the epistemology of provenance sees experience becoming the measure of truth in liberation rhetoric. I contend that the neoliberal narrative

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48 McIntyre 2014.

49 Mohanty 2003, p. 109.

50 Haraway 1988, p. 577.

51 Kruks 1995, p. 7.

52 Ibid.

of selfhood has influenced the standard of authenticity that is played out in narratives of oppression. The subject of neoliberalism is the entrepreneur of the self; the burden for care falls completely on the individual. The neoliberal authenticity-fantasy states that the only thing of importance is the inner-core of the self, which is inviolate. It is through confession that the subject supposedly reveals an allegedly authentic core, placing itself in relations of power and opening itself to assessment.<sup>53</sup> Emotions and experience must be subjected to the public gaze. The neoliberal subject is the subject of trauma; revealing the true self has become an imperative in a confessional culture, in which recognition of suffering is equatable to personhood. Where physical characteristics were once thought to show an immutable core of identity, it is trauma which now bears witness to truth.

Linda Alcoff describes the case of Alice Rhinelander, in the 1920s, whose white husband sued for annulment upon discovering that she was 'coloured'. Rhinelander's lawyer, in an effort to prove that her husband must have known her race before he married her, asked her to bare her breasts to the jury, who would be able to discern her race from her physical presence. The implication that the true self, an authentic identity, is always present and can be revealed and publicly judged, has always been implicit in narratives of identity.<sup>54</sup> This has taken on a new meaning in the neoliberal context of confession, as the demand for judgement is to be internalised and constantly fulfilled through confession. Yasmin Nair writes:

Ah, to confess, always to confess, to reveal, always to reveal, to always, always be She Who Will Bare Her Literal and Metaphorical Breasts and Speak Grand Truths. This is the Neoliberal demand.... How can we possibly think of you as real if you don't confess? No tragic dramas? Make them up! But, always: Confess and Reveal.<sup>55</sup>

Today, it is the confession of trauma, of 'tragic drama' as 'grand truth', that is the mark of the authentic self. Experiences of oppression are reified as authenticity, just as political questions are reduced to morality.

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53 Foucault 1976.

54 Alcoff 2006, p. 7.

55 Nair 2013.

## VII

As identities are increasingly broken down and existing grounds for collective praxis are increasingly destroyed, there is no stable basis on which to form new collectives: 'even as the margins assert themselves as margin, the denaturalizing assault they perform on coherent collective identity in the centre turns back on them to trouble their own identities.'<sup>56</sup> The language of trauma provides a way of equalising people and affiliating with people on the basis of suffering. Turning this into victimhood is a rejection of the dominant neoliberal narrative of self-responsibility. While we can no longer presume a shared experience, and while everyone's different experiences are unique and authentic, people are united by the pain of their past experience. The trouble with this current conception is that it stops short of turning suffering into a vision for a different world. The interest in politics as a question of recognition can also be seen as a way to overcome the lack of collective organisation; by asserting a collective that is not self-created, but the product of systemic failure, the need to organise, create and share a vision is circumvented. This can be framed as a move from the collective, which is the product of a concerted human effort to create a shared position, to a coalition of different subject-positions.

The confusion between oppression and identity leads to the reification of suffering as constitutive of identity. The demand of powerlessness as performed by oppressed subjects is a false characterisation of the multiple positions and stakes that oppressed peoples hold in the system. In the Black Lives Matter encounter with Hillary Clinton, where the activists refused to 'tell you all what you need to do', it can be seen how activists distance themselves from power. The problem is framed as one of 'white violence ... there's not much that we can do to stop the violence against us'.<sup>57</sup> This is a denial of the ways in which oppressed people can influence and have a stake in oppressive regimes.

BLM is a diverse network comprised of multiple positions, and the example I have used is not intended as indicative of this broad coalition. This is simply one instance which reflects the prevalence of a politics of demand. What is notable, however, is that, without a central power-structure or shared precepts, there is a wildly varying set of politics under the same banner. The dispersed structure of the BLM network means that the discursive power of the 'BLM' name can be theoretically captured by anyone, without accountability for its usage. In this sense, it is as much a platform as a movement. BLM is portrayed as a diverse and heterogenous coalition, containing multiple perspectives and

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56 Nair 2013, p. 53.

57 Tesfaye 2015.

demands. In the more than 1030 moments of disruption under the BLM banner, the content of the immediate, concrete demands of each protest is not of significance. Alicia Garza, a co-founder of the movement, maintains that 'we aren't concerned with policing who is and who isn't part of the movement. If someone says they are part of the BLM movement, that's true'.<sup>58</sup> Arguably, this further reflects the move from collective to coalition and the paucity of political vision in this move, which effectively effaces the space for political judgement. Instead of being united *for* something, we can only unite on the basis of exclusion and powerlessness, a multiplicity of identities that share the trauma of Black Lives.

The prevalence of this framework in Left identity politics shows the neoliberal individualisation of political struggle. For example, the popularity of the book *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People About Race* demonstrates the paucity of vision in conceiving of collective action. Reni Eddo-Lodge writes that

racism is a white problem. It reveals the anxieties, hypocrisies and double standards of whiteness. It is a problem in the psyche of whiteness that white people must take responsibility to solve. You can only do so much from the outside.<sup>59</sup>

Eddo-Lodge argues that it is the responsibility of whites to talk to fellow whites about racism. Again, this framework reduces anti-racism to an interpersonal project to change attitudes. In conceiving of non-white people as having no responsibility to influence, educate or raise consciousness, they are seen as a constitutive 'outside' of the system. This framework fetishises the powerlessness and victimhood of sufferers of racism, which is seen to be enacted primarily through interpersonal exchange. They appear as disadvantaged individuals, not as a common collective.

As I have argued, there is no constitutive 'outside' to power, and no purity of vision from the vantage-point of the oppressed. The logic of this thinking eschews the possibility for radical, systemic change; by reducing the scope of anti-racism to individual reflection and interpersonal dialogue, it reifies the system of white supremacy as economic, political and social brutality, beyond the scope of contestation. Without a historicised, political analysis of structural oppression, racism and misogyny can only be pathologised as individual traits; 'a problem in the psyche'. This naturally extends to a politics of (white)

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58 Alicia Garza, quoted in Fletcher 2015.

59 Eddo-Lodge 2017, p. 219.

guilt, where political issues are placed in a moral register and can only be dealt with through inward reflection and a purifying of the self. In this way, the impetus of collective and universal political principles is replaced with the demand to reflect on suffering and trauma. Systemic struggle becomes futile, and only those with social power can choose to change their attitudes: 'No, it's not the job of people of color to win over racism, it's the responsibility of white people to abandon it altogether.'<sup>60</sup>

I argue that this fixation on individual attitudes is a collision with neoliberal rationality. By reducing political phenomena to personal pathology, racism is pulled into a confessional culture, becoming individual traits that can be managed. This eschews a collective politics that would recognise individual attitudes as irrelevant outside of their contextualisation in structures of power, which are themselves contingent. The reification of victimhood cannot comprehend oppressive systems as riddled with contradictions and antagonisms. The problem with displacing responsibility from 'victim' to 'perpetrator' is that while theoretically it rejects the unequal existing system, in practice it places a demand on the system and those in power, implicitly relying on their existing legitimacy. A politics of demanding replaces a politics of creating, and by denying power, by asserting that oppression is surmountable through recognition, the power of the existing system is reinforced.

## Conclusion

In order to move beyond the depoliticising effects of individualisation that I have identified, it is necessary to reconsider the political salience of building a collective, as the pathway to conceiving of alternative ways of living. The current way in which we think of collective identity results from perceived shared experiences of trauma, outwardly imposed. While it is important to acknowledge the psychic elements of trauma and suffering, it is equally important to avoid reifying these as an identity. How do we move from a coalition of suffering to a common understanding of our experiences, to a new vision for building a new world? Who can appear? How can subjects negotiate their desire for recognition with the necessity of transforming what it means to be recognised?

This work opens avenues for future research into these questions. We need to attend to the living conditions of agency and what it means to be human, accepting that any identity will always be partial. This necessitates a broadly-based emancipatory politics that can move beyond the stultifying effects of

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60 Denzo Smith 2013.

interpersonal identity politics. The universal, however, is never articulated in advance. The 'we' that engages in collective action is not a pre-existing object but is created in the course of acting. To challenge the foreclosure of collective identity is to reopen the relationship between the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective, in a way that neoliberalism has purportedly excluded. The invisible universal of an unembodied agent and the visible particular that demands recognition are the multiplicity of the potential human.

While the concrete form of these tensions changes with our material conditions, the essence is historically visible. Fanon, in *Black Skins, White Masks*, affirms his existence as both a man and a black man. He sees how the visible is the material inscription of alienation from the potential universal; transforming the signification of the visible cannot overcome the fundamental contradiction between appearance and essence, it is 'to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future'.<sup>61</sup> But from his own past, he seeks to create the future of the world. If we are to change the ways the body may appear, we must challenge present relations between appearance and essence. In grappling with the meaning of identity, Fanon writes that 'The Negro is not. Any more than the white man'.<sup>62</sup> Recognising the weight of the past does not necessitate repeating it. To move from a politics of 'I am' to a politics of 'we want' requires considering anew what it means to be a 'we', through the particularities of the multiple possible articulations of the 'I's: 'It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.'<sup>63</sup> The continual creation of a new 'we' is the articulation of a new, collective subject-position and a statement of the human potential of future possibility. This articulation, as a process of collective endeavour, should compel us to look forwards, as well as inwards.

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