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The cultural complexity of victimhood

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The Cultural Complexity of Victimhood

Position paper

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In this paper, we would like to start a debate on the concepts of ‘victim’ and ‘victimhood’. More precisely, we will present these concepts as *cultural* concepts, instead of legal or psychological ones, sketching the cultural complexity of these concepts. As we see it, victimhood becomes an increasingly complex and global object of study and debate, for which legal and psychological definitions no longer suffice and which should therefore be brought in the domain of cultural studies. To describe (and perhaps: defend) our position, we will present a triptych. In the first part of this position paper, we will show the necessity of broadening the view of victimhood. In the second part, we will present four cases or vignettes, outlining in a convincing way, as we hope, the cultural complexity of victimhood. These cases are derived from different contexts and described from different perspectives, because we, as authors of this position paper have different backgrounds, theoretical baggage and research methods, although we all work in a Department of Culture Studies. In the third part, we will present several research challenges, particularly addressed to culture studies scholars, as an invitation to join in the complex, but exciting and urgent research topic of victimhood. As a whole, this position paper is meant to be an invitation to our colleague researchers from the fields of culture studies, law, criminology, victimology etc. to comment on it.

I. Victimhood as a cultural object of study: three arguments

Let us kick off this position paper with an extensive quote from a review of the year 2014 by Courtney Desiree Morris, specialized in African American Studies and based at Pennsylvania State University, US:

Two thousand dead in Palestine after seven weeks of war. Ebola leaping from host to host, 7,000 dead and counting. Two hundred Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram. Numbers on television screens abstracted from the living people they were intended to represent. Revolution in Kiev. ISIS and civil war in Iraq and Syria. Downed planes and air strikes. Invasions of surveillance. A lifeless black body on the concrete, anger running through the streets of Ferguson, protestors with their hands stretched up to the sky. Mourning portraits of dead children, their still faces peaceful and condemning. Pakistan. Libya. Sierra Leone. Ayotzinapa... One could point a finger at an atlas and anywhere find profound human suffering as the result of corporate malfeasance, natural disaster, militarism, and state violence (Morris 2015: 540-541).

In this review, Morris describes our contemporary world in terms of a profound global crisis. This crisis is global for several reasons. It is global because pain, suffering and victimhood can be found everywhere: among the affluent who die of consumption and the poor who are

famished, among the war-torn and the seemingly well-protected, among majorities and minorities, and in the Global North as well as the South. It is also global due to an increasing connectedness that ties (shifting perceptions of) perpetrators, victims, witnesses and state actors from around the world into a complex web of relationships.

Some examples to illustrate the complex web of relationships regarding victimhood:

1. In what Slavoj Žižek (2016) called an 'obscene version of carnival', women in Cologne become the victim of mass sexual assaults ostensibly perpetrated by migrants. Some of these migrants, in turn, can become the victim of human trafficking, truck suffocations or mass drownings due to the fact that safer routes into Europe are closed off by the EU's migration industry (Andersson 2014).
2. Almost two hundred Dutch nationals are being killed in Ukraine's airspace in an escalating war driving a wedge between East and West, which has turned the Ukraine into a political synecdoche of a new world system characterized by hybrid war and hybrid peace (Dunn and Bobick 2014).
3. In the 'spectacular favelas' of Brazil (Robb Larkins 2015), the poor are punished by what Kenneth Maxwell in a recent article in *The New York Review of Books* called the corruption of progress. This is a world in which the regime is required to secure global capital involving large-scale corruption (e.g. the Petrobras and FIFA scandals) while utterly failing to create a secure situation for its citizens (cf. Denyer Willis 2015).

If anything, these examples confirm the perspective of John and Jean Comaroff (2006: 8): our global order is 'greased by transnational commerce', which has turned lawlessness into a 'complex north-south collaboration.' Such collaborations are firmly entrenched in a political and moral economy dominated by multinationals that have blurred the line between profit and plunder.

The examples mentioned above, make clear that victimhood, under the circumstances described, becomes an increasingly complex and global issue and needs to be brought into the domain of cultural analysis. To support this claim we will put forward three arguments.

1. Law: 'punishing the poor'

First, we agree with criminal justice expert Lucia Zedner (2004: 7) that criminal justice can be seen as 'the symbolic construction of social order' and that the law is a means of imposing that order (see also Fassin 2013). Zedner quoted Durkheim who once argued that the real function of the law is 'to maintain inviolate the cohesion of society by sustaining the common consciousness in all its vigour' (1997 [1893]: 76). This might sound benign, she continues, but it is also a highly conservative stance: a social order is to be kept in place, 'with all the socio-economic inequalities, injustices, and prejudices that this involves' (2004: 7). In other words, the law and its criminal justice apparatus may very well leave existing forms of victimhood intact that result from a lack of social justice (racism, poverty, sexism, etc.). We can even go one step further with sociologists like Wacquant (2009) or Goffman (2014), by arguing that the punitive turn in penal policy (Burke, 2014: 415-418) has pushed criminal justice into the

domain of social justice, something that Wacquant calls 'punishing the poor'. This accentuates the conflicting contours of law (enforcement), which have long been acknowledged by critical criminologists (e.g. Quinney 1970) who have stressed that it is 'one of the focal points of conflict and struggle in modern society, a major means by which power is legitimized, and the form in which coercion is most routinely exercised' (Lukes and Scull in Donovan 2008: 50). Already in his 1970 (!) book *The Social Reality of Crime*, Quinney argues in a similar vein that law, rather than being a reflection of society in general, is actually a representation of the interests of certain classes or parts of society; segments that have the power to translate their own interests into public policy (Treviño 2000; Quinney 1970).

In sum, a strictly legal approach of victimhood might conceal how the law itself victimizes people (Pemberton 2015: 49). Rather, the social organization of crime and justice should itself be understood as a cultural phenomenon. Immediately springing to mind is Garland's (2001) work on the 'culture of control', but we also think about the earlier work in the field of cultural studies that looked into the construction of crime and victimhood in the UK (along the lines of Law and Order) as a sign of British culture in transformation (e.g. Hall et al. 1978). Such a cultural analysis may complicate the relationships between offenders, victims and state actors, and may uncover changing structures of meaning and signification in society with respect to crime and victimhood.

2. Legal definitions of victimhood are culturally embedded

Second, there is the obvious issue that legal definitions of the victim are bound by the legal system in which such definitions are embedded. Such systems emerge in particular cultural contexts and thus vary substantially. The relationship between law and society is a very strong one, as we know since the first publications that led to the field of legal anthropology (e.g. Malinowski 1926). As a consequence, a diversity of justice systems has developed worldwide, with significant differences in conceptions of victims and perpetrators and how they relate. While western criminal justice systems – with their emphasis on punishment – are often taken for granted, many other systems exist that revolve around a completely different understanding of justice, in which restoration, reparation or retribution, to give some examples, are preferred over punishment (Zedner 2004). This in itself deserves cultural analysis, all the more so when we keep in mind the global connectedness that we discussed at the outset, which brings people across the world into contact with one another who may hold onto to very different conceptions of justice, victimhood, etc.

3. Publicity: a culture of victimhood

Third, victimhood is not only an issue concerning those who is/are actually suffering; it also has a public aspect that has become so important in what Frank Furedi (1998) calls a 'culture of victimhood'. In his article *A Nation of Victims*, Furedi observed a sea change in British political culture, which he ascribes to 'the combination of victimhood and the public acknowledgment of suffering [as] a direct claim to moral authority' (p. 81). Furedi posits that in times of rugged individualism and shattered communities, suffering and mourning are virtually the only social acts that bring people together and, when communally expressed, are manifestations of national unity. Hence the 'politicization of grieving' in Britain, which has led

to the active promotion of a culture of victimhood. This has created a new situation in which the public display of suffering and victimhood has become very important. Although Furedi refers to Britain only, we believe that this is a wider trend connecting to what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) called 'life politics', that is, the coercion that people feel to share intimacies (e.g. their sufferings). Having in mind the global connectedness with which we started (see the quote by C.D. Morris), this sharing may connect people across the world, as will be discussed in our case descriptions below.

While the notion of victimhood typically makes one think of passivity and a lack of human agency, it must be stressed that it is exactly through the collective expression of grief and collective acts of mourning through rituals and other practices of memorialization that people may gain political agency (Walklate, Mythen and McGarry 2011). These 'politics of victimhood' (Jeffery and Candea 2006) add to the complexity of victimhood, as it draws individuals and groups who are not fitting in the legal, top-down definition of the victim, legitimized by policy, activities and agendas of governments and NGOs, into negotiations with respect to victimhood (e.g. what counts as suffering, what is recognized as victimhood?). Such recognition is, for example, the very business of international prosecutions and truth commissions, that is, platforms which, besides recognition of victimhood and consequently mechanisms of reparation, may also lead to a legitimization of power (e.g. The Rwandan Patriotic Front, led by Paul Kagame). Reconstruction processes in war-torn countries require a delicate balancing act between competing interests of victims, perpetrators, and the government. In addition, since these societies often heavily rely on external assistance in the rebuilding process, adopted transitional processes can also reflect the interplay of local agencies and global agendas, pushed forward by external stakeholders.

II. Four cases

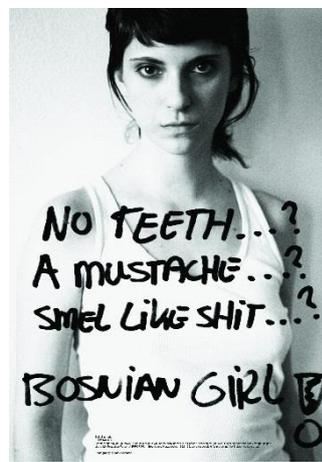
In the second part of our triptych, we present four vignettes from empirical research in which the issues mentioned in the first part figure prominently.

1. A Bosnian girl

Martin J.M. Hoondert

Description Between February 1994 and November 1995 a Dutch battalion under the command of the United Nations participated in peacekeeping operations in the former Yugoslavia. Its main task was the role of safekeeping the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica during the Bosnian war. In April 1993, the United Nations had declared the besieged enclave of Srebrenica in northeastern Bosnia a 'safe area' under UN protection. However, in July 1995, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), represented on the ground by the 400-strong contingent of Dutch peacekeepers, referred to as 'Dutchbat', did not prevent the town's capture by the Army of Republika Srpska and the subsequent massacre. More than 8,000 Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, were killed. In 2004, the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), located in The Hague, ruled that the massacre of the enclave's male inhabitants constituted genocide, a crime under international law.

Dutchbat was accommodated in Potočari, at a former factory site (a cars' factory). During their stay, the Dutch soldiers put texts, drawings and graffiti on the walls on the inside of the factory. One of these texts was and still is insulting to Bosnian women. Its text reads:



Graffiti, see:
<https://srebrenicagenocide1995.wordpress.com/2008/06/27/dutch-graffiti-in-srebrenica-sickening-legacy-of-the-united-nations-in-srebrenica/>, accessed 28 April 2016. Artwork by Kameric, see: *Balkanist* 15 July 2015: <http://balkanist.net/what-does-a-victim-look-like-sejla-kameric/>

The Bosnian artist Sejla Kameric (Sarajevo, 1976) reproduced the graffiti on a photograph of herself, as protest against the insult. In 2003, this photograph circulated on posters and postcards in several European cities, and it is now part of an exhibition displayed in the great hall of the compound/factory.

I visited Dutchbat's compound in July 2015, on the occasion of the 20th commemoration of the genocide. The compound, which is managed by a local foundation, had been done up. The walls had been plastered and the floors were renewed. The main graffiti, however, had been retained, among which the text about the Bosnian girl.

Reflection For survivors of the Srebrenica Genocide, the ‘Bosnian girl’-text not only showed the lack of respect of the Dutch soldiers towards the inhabitants of Srebrenica, but also, as a synecdoche, the reason why the Genocide took place: the UN, represented by Dutchbat, did not only fail, they just did not care! The text reveals on the one hand how the Dutchbat soldiers, or at least one of them, felt at that very moment: caught in a situation they ‘disliked’. On the other hand, the text is an expression of inappropriate men’s humor. The retaining of the graffiti, after more than 20 years, stresses the Bosniaks as double victimized people: they not only severely suffered from the Genocide, but also from the unconcerned attitude of Dutchbat. The text is shown, again and again, to visitors of the compound and it will be part of a future exhibition financed by the Dutch government. As such, the graffiti and the showing of it, performs the Bosniaks’ victimhood and is an expression of claiming victimhood against possible denial. The retaining of the graffiti is not an issue of coping with victimhood or commemorating the victims, but of protest against the ways in which the Bosniaks have been victimized.

The reproduction of the graffiti by Sejla Kamerić reinforces the protest and stresses the insulting character of the graffiti. In an interview with the artist by Seila Rizvić, the effect of the piece ‘Bosnian Girl’ is described as follows: ‘A striking indictment of the failures of the international community during the Srebrenica massacre, this image deftly blurs the lines between subject and object and forces the viewer to think critically about what victimhood looks like in the context of war’ (Rizvić 2015). Who was victim in 1994/1995? Dutchbat? The Bosniaks? Victim of what? And, who decides on the definition of victimhood in the Srebrenica case? These are the questions the spectator of Kamerić’s artwork is confronted with.

The Bosnian Girl artwork by Kamerić is more than an individual piece of art. It became a public object, an image that was widely shared. It is a good example of the publicity of victimhood and agency by victims and their surviving relatives. Besides, and in my opinion also confusingly, Bosnian girls and women identify with it. Many girls, according to Kamerić, use it as their profile picture on Facebook and other social networks. As such, an insulting text has been transformed into a symbol of pride and (national) identity.

Research challenges At least two research questions come to the fore as result of the reflection on the Bosnian girl case. First, there is the question of the transformation of symbols. The graffiti on the walls of the Dutchbat compound has been appropriated as a symbol of both victimhood and identity. The multi-layered, confusing and contradictory use and appropriation of symbols (objects, texts, gestures, and acts) is a useful lens to study the materiality of victimhood in all its complexity.

Second, there is the relationship between ‘being a victim’ and identity. The Bosnian girl case makes clear that a symbol of victimization can be transformed into a symbol of national identity and proudness. This refers to the fluid, culturally embedded character of identity, which is not static but always in the state of ‘becoming somebody’. The multi-layered character of identity is a useful lens to study the claims of victimhood in the public domain.

Description The Aruban Mitch Henriquez had travelled to the Netherlands for a family visit. In June 2015, he was at Night at the Park, a summer concert in The Hague. There he made the mistake to underestimate the power of the rule of ‘denied negative reciprocity’ (Scott 1990), which characterizes hierarchical relations of the kind that exists between police and policed: do not trade a slap for a slap, an insult for an insult, or a bad joke for a bad joke. In the company of several police officers, Henriquez had touched his crouch while shouting that he had a gun in his pocket. According to some bystanders, this was a joke: in a Caribbean context ‘gun’ can refer to impressive male genitals. The police responded and attempted to bring him into custody and later declared that he had resisted his arrest – the proverbial trading of a slap for a slap. Henriquez had ‘traded’ twice and paid for it with his life. Results from the autopsy indicate that he died of asphyxiation after being held in a chokehold and being crushed by five officers who sat on his body. This was a thorn in the side of the authorities, because chokeholds are nowhere described in Dutch law nor are they taught at the Police Academy. They are not part of the rules of engagement intended to keep police in check, yet they are routine in discretionary policing.

At the concert, where UB40 had just performed, Henriquez was lying in the dust with his hands cuffed behind his back and his eyes shut. The labored shallowness of his breathing had people worried, so the recordings began. Like many of the encounters of African Americans with police in the United States, this ‘arrest gone wrong’ was captured on video with a smartphone, uploaded on the web and thrown in the public spotlights. In contrast to the video of the 1991, Rodney King beating in Los Angeles, to name one famous example, a recording like this can now easily be retrieved with a few keystrokes. When played, one can hear the familiar background voices expressing indignation and outrage coming from people who were present at this uncomfortable site of police violence. I say ‘familiar’ because the upsurge of what is called ‘hashtag activism’ (Bonilla and Rosa 2015) against police has given such voices a firm place on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Being plugged into globalized circuits of communication people immediately started to invoke images online of Eric Garner, who died of a chokehold performed by officers employed by the New York Police Department, and Freddie Gray, who was forced into a police van by the Baltimore police while having a spinal cord injury.

The publicity of this death-by-cop victim wrought havoc in the streets of The Hague as protestors occupied a particular neighborhood, known for its history of police discrimination, to voice their dissent. It was mainly the devil-may-care way in which the case was perceived to be handled that made people fly into rage and pour torrents of scorn onto the Dutch criminal justice system – the police in particular. At first, the Public Prosecution Service had stated in a press release that Henriquez had become unwell on his way to the police station, but the video soon made it clear that this story did not jive: Henriquez was already unconscious when surrounded by the officers in question. Instead of following emergency protocol prescribing reanimation, they heedlessly dragged him into a police vehicle. The Dutch Prosecutors caved under the pressure of grassroots media; they had to clean up their act and admit that Henriquez was already dying immediately after the chokehold was

performed. A mobile device had reversed the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker 1967), which usually allocates the right to police members to define a situation, to tell others what 'really' happened.



Retrieved from NRC, 30 June 2015

Reflection While this short chronicle cannot do justice to the complexity of the case, we can make some inferences within the framework of section I. Most obviously, the case touches upon the production of victims by the law and its enforcers. Not only are we talking about Henriquez himself. More generally we refer to the law-and-disorder thesis proposed by Comaroff and Comaroff (2006): in certain time-space configurations, the state and its agents create disorder, not order. The recent protests against police across the globe attest to this fact (think Kiev, Paris, Ferguson, The Hague, Hong Kong, São Paulo, Istanbul, New Delhi, etc.). Arguably, these protests are responses to the fact, mentioned by Zedner (2004) in our previous section, that criminal justice systems leave existing forms of victimhood intact that result from a lack of social justice (e.g., racism, poverty). That being said, it needs to be remarked that more than two hundred of the protestors in The Hague were arrested for violating a ban of assembly that was implemented after some of the protestors had turned violent. Instead of recognizing the protests as a social affair (addressing public issues), politicians immediately started to individualize the problem at hand (the killing of Henriquez was tagged an unfortunate mistake and protestors were psychologically disqualified as 'retards' by Prime Minister Rutte).

Second, this case immediately problematizes the legal framework of victimhood that gives priority to the suffering of individuals. The public aspect of this case is indisputable. This much becomes clear from the fact that many of the protestors in The Hague were taking their grief to the streets without knowing the man. This is not to ignore the genuine sadness and sorrow that people may have experienced as a result of the private suffering of Henriquez.

Instead, it serves to emphasize that such suffering, when caused by state-actors, gets easily stored in public memory and transformed into general concerns that, for instance, may have to do with police racism, deliberately ungoverned animosities or passions of police officers, or curtailed civil liberties – things that can potentially affect anyone. As such, local happenings are lent a larger than local meaning and private troubles come to be understood as public issues. In this light, we are very much reminded of the work of Katherine Verdery (1999) on the ‘political lives of dead bodies’.

Finally, speaking about the public aspects of the case is not the same thing as speaking about ‘one public’ (cf. Mutsaers and Van Nuenen forthcoming). The protests in The Hague were to a large extent organized and prepared ad hoc and online. Time and location were announced on Facebook and Twitter and locals as well as non-locals could tick a box indicating if they intended to come. While we have no specific data on the composition of this ‘community of resistance’ in any authorized, certified sense of the word, (social) media coverage of the protests make it clear that this was a highly diverse collective. Their coming together can best be called, with Erving Goffman, a ‘focused gathering’ – ‘a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow’ (in Geertz, 1973: 424). It was their online participation, their engagement with hashtag activism, which forged a sort of shared ‘political temporality’ (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). At these focused gatherings people met for a particular purpose and then dispersed again. Indeed, the low threshold of participation in online platforms fosters a great range of participation modes for protesters and may constitute a society of ‘networked individualism’, in which people are increasingly operating in online networks as individuals, rather than as part of a stable group. Neither can we say that this ‘community of resistance’ was bound by nationality. Not only did cross-linking occur across the globe; a petition was started to claim justice for Henriquez and it was started by a UK citizen. People all over the world signed the petition. This global connectedness further complicates the myriad ways in which victimhood is experienced, communicated, shared and politicized.

3. A monument for boat refugees

William Arfman

Description On October 7, 2015 a wooden framework was put up in one of the halls of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. The structure as a whole was shaped like a graph, but the accompanying sign did not note this. Instead, it informed students passing by that what they were seeing here was a monument for boat refugees and that Nosrat Mansouri, the Dutch-Iranian artist who made it, needed their help to get it completed. They could do so by folding small paper boats and place these in the empty wooden rectangles making up the installation. Both folding instructions and paper were provided, with the latter coming from satirical Middle Eastern newspapers. In addition to explaining how to fold the paper boats, the instructions also encouraged students to use this moment as an opportunity to reflect upon the dangerous journey that refugees have to make and to realize that some of them might one day become students too. It concluded that by placing their boats in the monument, students would be helping to ‘save refugees from being forgotten’.



© Hogeschool van Amsterdam

Reflection In order to understand what is going on in the hallways of this Dutch educational institute, legal definitions of victimhood will not be of much use. The specific legal status of the people involved, or imagined to be involved, is of little relevance. Nobody is on trial, no blame is assigned and no one is asking for justice being served. Instead, people are folding small paper boats. In stark contrast, then, to the descriptions given above of the global complexities of what is now called the European refugee crisis, the seemingly simple acts at this ‘altar’ come across as surprisingly local and concrete. However, by providing passers-by an opportunity to attend to the issue at hand in an almost ritual fashion, these acts in fact provide a perfect point of entry for a more in-depth understanding of the (hidden) intricacies of the European refugee crisis in general.

A relevant question in this regard is how victimhood is conceived of in relation to this temporary monument, if it is not in legal terms. This question is particularly important given how contested the concept of victimhood has become within public debate, with refugees being depicted as anything from innocent victims of mass drownings to potential terrorists and rapists.

Three things in particular become apparent when analyzing this artistic practice in terms of victimhood. The first of these is that victimhood is not conceived of directly, but rather indirectly, i.e. symbolically. Here we can note such elements as the fragility of the paper boats, the reference to humor and resistance visible from the type of paper used, or the way the installation as a whole is shaped like a graph, plotting numbers of refugees.

Secondly, however, and this is something the artist himself emphasizes, the point of the monument is not to decode these symbols, but rather to engage them. By having people fold little paper boats themselves, and by having them physically add these to the altar, these individuals become part of the performance. They help construct the monument, and as such

become part of this particular construction of victimhood as well. When interviewed, the artist strongly emphasized this aspect by calling the monument an altar.

Thirdly, there is the aforementioned issue of locality. It is true that this monument for boat refugees was erected in a specific hallway of a specific educational facility. At the same time, however, the installation also brings the global to bear on this locality. Students and teachers who choose to participate (and even those who choose not to) are confronted in their own hallways with larger societal issues. Although such engagement is given shape symbolically and performatively, or maybe precisely because this is the case, this temporarily turns the global into a local experience.

So, what does this monument for boat refugees say about victimhood? Certainly, it does not present us with a straightforward conception of what it is to be a refugee. Clearly, both the artist and the project's funding body, the Foundation for Refugee Students, consider the dangerous journeys that refugees see themselves forced to make as something worthy of our attention and reflection. Then again, they do not depict refugees as helpless victims either. The artist was himself a refugee once and credits much of his inspiration to the refugee experience. [His website](#) even speaks of the advantages of being a refugee. Similarly, we saw above how it was emphasized that some refugees would one day become the students that walk these same hallways. Where legal definitions of victimhood serve to provide clarity, this monument for boat refugees addresses the complexities of victimhood through artistic ambiguity and performative symbolism instead. What it provides is not so much a chance to define or categorize what it means (or should mean) to be a victim, but rather an opportunity to study how such complex meanings are negotiated locally by specific stakeholders.

4. Senga¹

Jef Van der Aa

Description When I heard about Senga for the very first time some two years ago, she was a 16-year old Congolese girl that had come to Belgium nine months before via Ivory Coast, where her uncle had a shop in fishing equipment and was well placed and connected in the local community. He was the one that had taken care of her paperwork and that had prepared her for the immigration questions. Both of her parents had died in atrocities in South-Eastern Congo (Kivu), and the official story to tell would be that she had suffered intimidation and physical violence because her father had been politically active with Hutu groups ('Banyamulenge') from Rwanda. However, Banyamulenge was originally only used for relatively long-term Rwandan immigrants (some tracing their immigration back to the early 20th century), and only very few people would refer to new Rwandan immigrants as being Banyamulenge. In any case, Senga used this term for a very specific sub-group of Rwandan immigrants: those that had recently migrated to Congo and that were active in Hutu politics. Her father had then been active, as a Congolese citizen himself, with people belonging to this group and wanting to gain a political voice in Kivu for the Rwandan population. The motives of the father for doing so remained unknown. The story, or at least the story as it came to the asylum commission (as Senga had applied for and was granted permission to stay in Belgium,

¹ 'Senga' is a pseudonym, full names are known to the author/researcher.

at least temporarily) and by extension to the care center, was fabricated and inspected many times in Ivory Coast before Senga's departure to Europe. Senga's mother, who was a primary school teacher, had not been given a role in the political story of her father, who was 'without a job for many years'. Later on, it became clear that Senga's dad had trained, or at least wanted to train himself as a carpenter.

Both parents were very young when giving birth to Senga, probably neither of them older than sixteen, the age when I met Senga and when she herself, according to the case history discussions in the care center, had become possibly sexually active in a non-desired environment (when caretakers were hinting at possible ties to a prostitution ring). When Senga arrived in Belgium, and was placed in a specialized center in attendance of her asylum interviews, she actively sought out books from the library concerning the political situation in central Africa. When she was transferred to special youth services in Antwerp, and subsequently offered guidance from an Antwerp care center, she had not been in contact with the police neither had she committed or been involved in any illegal activities. The reason for her transfer was simply that she was deemed 'adult enough' to try to facilitate her independence by making her live on her own, offering guidance and educational options. The trajectory she was offered by the care center was exactly that: an apartment with counseling sessions concerning all the administrative perils that come with living on one's own as well as options for education in Antwerp. The primary educational choice (and in fact also the default one) would be to finish high school. Meanwhile Senga had received a temporary permit and had been living successfully on her own for a couple of months. A couple of weeks before I heard about Senga, she had been 'scaled in' at the third year of high school (although her real educational level was late primary school), to not let the age difference be too big and because the school principal as well as the caretakers were convinced of Senga's 'adult-like' behavior.

At the same time, to the mind of the care providers, a picture arose of Senga as fairly mentally unstable, and 'it was such a pity she had quit psychological sessions as she would really benefit from them'. They had tried many times to convince her to see a psychologist again, but said it would be almost impossible to make her do it if there wasn't a record of 'punishable' behavior. It was unclear to me at the time why it was deemed necessary or even good should Senga see a therapist. I convinced myself that they were right, as someone coming from such a crisis situation would obviously benefit from talking about such trauma. Secondly, Senga was also seen as someone who 'never showed up on time', lived 'on African time' or 'who thought the OCMW (social welfare center) was open on Saturdays'. By saying this, caretakers were voicing their frustration concerning Senga's slow apprehension of local institutional networks and frameworks, some of which are fairly complicated to most native Belgian citizens. Both of these elements (Senga as a fairly mentally instable, passive girl) resonated well with the possibility that, as the rumor was going, she was about to fall prey to prostitution, or that she has already been recruited for such purposes, allegedly by an 'older man' with whom she has been seen a couple of times.

Reflection In this vignette it becomes clear how telling personal trauma in institutional settings is hampered by epistemological frames that prevent what Hymes (1983) has referred

to as 'breakthrough into performance'. These frames have templates that are often institutionally motivated aiming at registering and organizing the social individual into residual, treatable victim categories, such as 'asylum seeker', 'alien', 'incest victim', 'alcohol abuser' and such. However, instead of creating a space for the teller to deal with psychological and social trauma, the frames work to establish knowledge that aims to satisfy administrative institutional goals. One such frame is the question and answer frame in asylum seekers' interviews, another is the ethnolinguistic profiling of second generation immigrant children, yet another the pedagogical discourse in homework supervision of children in care. What does it mean for persons prone to such categorizations to have to carve out an identity as 'victim' convincingly?

III. Research challenges

To conclude our position paper, we would like to leave you with five challenges we have come across while looking at the concepts of 'victim' and 'victimhood' from a cultural perspective. These challenges highlight the difficulties involved in understanding victimhood culturally and welcome rather than reduce complexity. More importantly, however, we put them forward here to identify the important research opportunities to which they point. As we have argued above, legal and psychological definitions of victimhood do not suffice. They show a tendency to ignore the public dimensions of victimhood and to conceal the ways in which the law itself victimizes people, while essentially being cultural constructs themselves as well. As our four cases studies show, approaching victimhood from a cultural perspective allows for new situations and practices to be scrutinized and new questions to be asked. Concretely, the five challenges we put forward here fall into two categories. First, we have three challenges that relate to issues of establishing what is meant by victimhood within a specific cultural setting. These challenges concern the cultural practices, politics and domains through which victimhood is given meaning. Next, we have two challenges which relate to the more fundamental tensions involved in understanding victimhood culturally. These challenges concern the tensions of place and power.

1. The practices of victimhood

The first thing that becomes evident when looking at our four research vignettes above, is that approaching victimhood from a cultural angle means taking into account cultural practices like music festivals, art projects or military graffiti. This brings with it new questions. To what extent, for example, does it matter that the monument for boat refugees is presented to students passing by as an art project? What does it mean for our understanding of victimhood if a distasteful graffiti joke can be transformed into an internet meme protesting that insult? There are no easy answers to these questions. We argue here that it is impossible to understand victimhood without understanding the diverse cultural practices in which ideas about victimhood are embedded and through which they are constantly constructed and reconstructed (Lowney and Holstein 2001). This position presents us with an ongoing challenge, however. It is of no use to go into the field with a preconceived definition of victimhood. Instead, for each new case that is going to be studied, we will have to start more or less from scratch. Victimhood is given shape differently in a biography than in a monument. What we need to turn this challenge into an opportunity, then, are scholars who are experts in studying biographies or monuments, so as to bring their expertise to bear on issues of victimhood.

2. The politics of victimhood

As our research vignettes above also show, it is not just taking cultural practices into account that poses a challenge for understanding victimhood culturally, it is also that a wide variety of people play a part. Take, for example, the case of Senga, which involves a psychologist, two caretakers and even the researcher himself. Similarly, the case of Mitch Henriquez features law enforcement and protesters representing clashing ideas of victimhood and

perpetratorship. How can we determine what victimhood entails within the context of a certain practice or situation, if those involved do not even agree with one another? This becomes even more of an issue when we realize that these practices and situations do not just come to pass. The actual shape they take in practice, such as an interactive monument for boat refugees or a photo on a Bosnian girl's Facebook wall, are in fact already the result of previous negotiations and confrontations between the various people involved. However, taking all of these interactions between the people involved seriously is also the key to turning this challenge into an opportunity. This is especially evident when such negotiations or clashes of ideas themselves become the practices we investigate. Here we can think of discussions about how best to take care of a girl like Senga, or even the (violent) confrontations between protesters and law enforcement. We should not just pay attention to how ideas about victimhood are embedded in cultural practices, then, but also to the politics of victimhood that in turn shape these practices.

3. The domains of victimhood

Neither cultural practices, nor the politics of negotiation that shape them, can be understood in a cultural vacuum. Three of our four vignettes take place in Northwestern Europe, more particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands. It is impossible to understand the position taken by Senga's caretakers without taking this into account. Western attitudes towards victims are strongly informed by a concept of victimhood that is not only legal in origins, but rooted deeply in a narrative of psychological trauma as well (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Different cultures, whether regional or institutional, deal differently with victims, with attitudes ranging from silencing victims or blaming them, to deferring to them or granting them special agency (Govier 2015). Problematically, this adds an additional layer of complexity to our efforts to understand victimhood culturally. Victimhood is experienced and negotiated not just through particular practices, which are in turn informed by negotiations and confrontations involving a variety of stakeholders, but all of this takes place within specific cultural domains as well. Even more problematically, it often even involves overlapping or clashing cultural domains. Again, though, it is precisely in these clashes that opportunities for new research emerge as well.

4. Victimhood and place: local or global?

For all of the challenges identified above, the role of place is of clear relevance. Practices take place in specific locations, like a former car factory near Srebrenica or the halls of a university building in Amsterdam, as well as in particular cultural domains, which are also regionally bound. The politics of victimhood are therefore politics of place as well. As we saw with the monument for boat refugees, however, the local cannot be taken as a straightforward concept. Dutch students come to identify with the perilous journeys of refugees, someone from the UK calls for justice regarding the death of an Aruban visitor to the Netherlands, Senga is accused of still living 'on African time', and a racist Dutch joke becomes a Bosnian sign of pride. In each of these cases, we witness the fundamental blurring of the local and the global (Robertson 1995). Moreover, the challenge faced here, is not just one of diversity, but of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007). In order to understand what victimhood entails culturally,

we need to face a world in which the relevant cultural practices are caught up in a diversification of diversity.

5. Victimhood and power: agency or structure?

Just like 'place' figures into each of our four research vignettes, so does power. Both Senga and Mitch Henriquez initially seem powerless against the institutionalized forces they face. Both, however, also rile up against these forces. Senga by refusing psychological treatment and Mitch by trading the proverbial slap for a slap. Likewise, both Selja Kameric and Nosrat Mansouri find empowerment in apparent victimhood. The former by turning an insult into a symbol of pride and the latter by playfully identifying his refugee background as a powerful source of inspiration. Victimhood, then, cannot be understood as a concept that revolves around passivity (Govier 2015). Then again, neither should we underestimate the role of existing power structures. Mitch Henriquez, after all, did actually fall victim to police violence. The challenge is to leave room for a discussion of both structure and agency (Giddens 1979). Then again, it is precisely by employing a cultural approach that the interaction between the two can be best made visible. Here it could be noted, for example, that different cultural practices or domains allow for different degrees of agency, or that politics are inherently about the tension between agency and structure.

In sum, there are several (closely related) research topics that come to the fore in studying victimhood from a cultural perspective:

- Victimhood and identity
- Victimhood and diversity
- Victimhood and agency
- Victimhood and narrative
- Victimhood and globalization

We started this position paper by calling for a debate on 'victim' and 'victimhood' as cultural concepts, arguing that legal or psychological definitions no longer suffice if we want to understand these concepts in today's world. In the discussions that followed, however, we have not sought to redefine either term. Instead, we offered four examples of ongoing research and derived five research challenges from these short vignettes. The underlying argument could be summarized as follows: studying victimhood from a cultural perspective can only proceed if we embrace the complexities involved. We do not need new definitions of victimhood. What we need is new types of research into the myriad and complex ways in which victimhood is given shape in practice.

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