WALKING WOUNDED

Author Carrie A. Rentschler reframes the discourse of victimization

"Victim," Carrie A. Rentschler writes, "is one of the keywords of Americans' political lexicon." One would be hard-pressed to disagree, given the vast range of emotionally charged situations in which the term is wielded, contested, and often manipulated in American society. Far from being a mere rhetorical exercise, there is an enormous amount at stake in framing the experience of being a victim—it can quite literally make the difference between supporting or opposing a war, siding with the accused or the accuser, and justifying or condemning everything from the ongoing class-action discrimination suit filed against Walmart to the next fleet of Gaza-bound aid flotillas about to set sail in defiance of Israel's military occupation of Palestine.

Rentschler, an associate professor and the William Dawson Scholar in feminist media studies at Canada's McGill University, takes aim at a number of the theoretical and practical complexities of victimization in her recently published first book, *Second Wounds* (Duke University Press, 2011). Building on her previous scholarly work at the intersections of cultural studies, feminist politics, journalism, and political theory, Rentschler offers a detailed history of the victims' rights movement in the United States, though the book could best be described as a critical analysis of how victims have been actively defined and represented in mass media, political discourses, public debates, and within the law itself. *Second Wounds* not only raises crucial questions about the ways we collectively think about violence and crime, but also asks us to consider whose voices get heard, whose are silenced, and to which political ends this keyword is ultimately mobilized.

One of the main issues at the core of *Second Wounds* is the co-optation of "victims' rights" from a movement for justice and recognition to a conservative battle cry for punishment in which systemic violence against women is almost never addressed as such. What are some of the major factors that mark this seemingly drastic transformation, and what kind of relationship does the movement have to feminist activism?

There's an uneasy and contentious relationship between feminist antiviolence activism and victims' rights activism. While feminist activism against rape, domestic violence, and child abuse developed alongside victims' rights activism in the 1970s, the two were quite distinct at the time, and in some important respects still are today, depending on which organizations and what kinds of activism we are talking about. While feminists were building rape crisis centers and women's shelters outside of the system of criminal justice, victims' rights activists of the 1970s were mobilizing inside the offices of prosecutors and district attorneys and in police departments; they were targeting Supreme Court decisions that protected the rights of defendants and helping to establish victim/witness units, among other efforts aimed at improving the prosecution of offenders via the empowerment of victims' rights. These latter

efforts sought to bring crime victims more directly into the process of police investigation and criminal prosecution.

That said, feminist activists have also had their politics hijacked by victims' rights initiatives, and their language appropriated by victims' rights advocates. The key concept of the victims' rights movement, "secondary victimization," came from feminist efforts to name the kinds of institutional harm and neglect victims of sexual violence face. That term was "the second rape," and it carries with it a whole host of problems, the most blatant of which is turning rape into a metaphor through which victims' rights activists would compare the experience and act of being sexually assaulted with the experience and act of being neglected and/or poorly treated by police officers, hospital staff, lawyers, and other institutional actors. One difference I would assert between feminist and victims' rights meanings of the term is that when victims' rights advocates use it, they usually stop short of making the systemic critique of violence that is so central to feminist antiviolence work and thought.

Second Wounds offers a detailed analysis of how victimization and victims of crime are represented in mass media, which is hardly surprising given the pedagogical role that news media, in particular, play in terms of collectively teaching us about cultural issues, social problems, and the like. What kind of roles do television news and dramas play in terms of shaping our views about victims of crime?

Television news plays a huge role in shaping ideas about who crime victims are, what victims look like, what crimes they are shown to have suffered, and where those crimes occur. TV news, reality-based crime shows, and fictional programming are all powerful purveyors of misleading ideas about crime, its perpetrators, and its victims. Over the past 180 years of U.S. print news and 60 years of TV news production, we've overwhelmingly seen women as victims of murderous, stranger-perpetrated sexual violence. Their perpetrators are typically portrayed as men of color, and the spaces in which violent crime [occurs] are depicted as "the street" and in neighborhoods deemed dangerous—which usually signifies poor and racially segregated areas.

The white female crime victim we see on TV is also the main victim we see portrayed in victims' rights advocacy. Those victims' rights activists we see most readily in news media coverage of crime are the parents of white child-murder victims. They are also the victims depicted in media coverage as being the most innocent, most undeserving, and most worthy of representation. Activists of color, such as the parents of children who have been killed due to gun violence, have been marginalized in the movement's mainstream. We rarely see these activists represented in media coverage, and we rarely see their children given the kind of high-profile coverage that so many young white females like Elizabeth Smart or Jessica Lunsford were, if they are even represented at all.

On a related note, you mention how talk shows (and many news features) often frame the issue of victimization as a narrative of "recovery and redemption." This phenomenon would seem to pose an especially big set of problems for the ways in which violence against women is depicted, no?

Through victims' rights activism, the family began to be portrayed as the crime victim. The emotional burden of surviving families has achieved wide airing in venues such as television talk shows, [and] it's true that these shows tend to define social problems in overly therapeutic terms and often cast systemic forms of domination and oppression in individual, and often highly medicalized, terms. The victim, in other words, is made sick by her oppression, and the solution is chiropractic realignment of her psyche.

This is especially a problem when it comes to violence against women, where so many talk shows create this confessional space for women to share their experiences with violence, but the solutions they provide are often based solely on the individual and the unattainable quest for closure. At the same time, TV talk shows of the 1980s and 1990s were important mainstream sites in which social problems and institutionalized forms of gendered and sexual violence achieved public recognition.

I remember talking to you about 10 years ago about your involvement in women's self-defense training, and you made a number of connections between women's self-defense, feminist politics, and what could generally be called the politics of victimization. What links do you draw between your research and your work as a self-defense instructor?

I started the research for the book around 1997, when I was a graduate student, in the context of teaching with a feminist self-defense collective that I cofounded with three other women. Our teaching philosophy was based on providing students with the most accurate information about the contexts in which violence against women occurs, the possibilities for evading and defending oneself against violence, and the ways we could collectivize our efforts by sharing knowledge with other women and girls—to go from the risk-reduction mentality of most self-defense [initiatives] to larger collective efforts at violence prevention. We directly challenged the stranger-danger myth that says women are most likely to be raped by someone they don't know (the opposite is true), and instead of rattling off statistics about how many women are raped every year, we drew on existing research about how successful women are at avoiding rape when they run, yell, or do both. We were especially critical of law-enforcement approaches to self-defense, which tend to reproduce the idea that men are the protectors of women, and that rape happens in contexts where a male protector is absent.

It was a radicalizing educational experience that provided me with a key set of tools to evaluate and challenge victims' rights activism—especially its investments in punishment over prevention.

With so much of _Second Wounds_ focused on the political ramifications of public knowledge that gets produced about crime, victims, and victimization, I imagine that you had to walk a bit of a tightrope when putting the text together, seeing as how your work is now part of the very discourse you were studying.

I wrote the book to answer the questions of what victims' rights discourse is, where it comes from, how it redefined victimization, and how it is politically being used. The process of putting the book together really forced me to critically examine the limits of my own education

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in feminist self-defense. I also felt really moved by the activists I interviewed; I really felt the weight of their grief and rage and the desire to see justice done for their own family members, and for other victims. One of the ways I addressed the fact that some of my [interviewees] really wanted to see their son's or daughter's killer punished was by looking for other activists who sought a different kind of end point to their advocacy work—the end of the death penalty, for instance. I realized the range of political positions in victims' rights activism all come from the same basic place, and that is the life-changing experience of losing a family member to violence. In providing a space for the expression of that experience in the book, I also wanted to demonstrate that there are no guarantees for what kind of political and social action will develop out of it.

There seems to be a delicate balance that needs to be struck in terms of effectively advocating for victims' rights but not doing so in a way that either uncritically supports a racist/classist/sexist prison-industrial complex, or actively promotes what you call "antivictimism." What kind of discourse of victimization would you like to see popularized?

Yes, there's a fine line between criticizing victim politics and being antivictim. The victims' rights movement has been really successful at defining victim politics in law-and-order terms. It doesn't help, either, that "victim" is such a denigrated term in popular culture. It seems like everywhere women and girls turn they are being told: "Don't be a victim!" As if victims of violence and targets of oppression can choose whether or not to be victimized. "Victim" has come to signify a passive and manipulative mentality, or a kind of person who refuses to recognize her own decision-making power. The former claim we see being made by people like Charlie Sykes, the right-wing radio host from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and author of books like *A Nation of Victims*, while the latter is made by antivictimist men and women who identify with the legacy of civil rights movements and as feminists.

The credit for the term "antivictimism" belongs to Alyson Cole, author of a great book titled *The Cult of True Victimhood*. She argues that antivictimists shifted public debate from the problem of victimization to the character and mentality of the victim. The problem to solve, then, was the person of the victim, not the social conditions of oppression and domination. These, unfortunately, are the current terms of debate about victimization, and they have to be challenged.

"Victimization" is one of the most important terms we have at our disposal for describing the harms, injuries, and experiences of oppression and domination, and we have to claim it back from those that have made it a dirty word. As a self-defense instructor, I taught my students how to name behavior that is threatening, intimidating, and violent. In naming the behavior, they focused on the source of the problem and the target of their response. The language of victimization functions similarly. It is the language we have for naming power and its effects.

Zack Furness is an assistant professor of cultural studies at Columbia College Chicago and an emeritus punk rocker. His interview with Rosey Grier appeared in *Bitch* no. 49.