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ARTICLE

Layers of Legibility: A Method for Anti-Carceral Intelligibility

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Abstract

Intelligibility is often seen as a paradigmatic goal for overcoming epistemic oppression. Understanding oppression helps to undo structures of ignorance and to create the grounds for moral, political, and legal arguments that protect marginalized people from being silenced. This is especially crucial for those who experience sexual and gendered violence, as they often struggle both to understand their own experiences and to make others understand them. In this paper, I argue that social epistemologists and feminist standpoint theorists often focus in an unvariegated way on intelligibility, inadvertently reinforcing reliance on carceral structures—systems that tend to reproduce harm and violence for survivors. This concern is particularly relevant in feminist anti-rape politics, where the pressure to make experiences legible often intersects with calls for carceral solutions, which fail to address the root causes of harm and maintain cultures of sexual and gender violence. To remedy this, I propose a new epistemological framework that preserves the importance of intelligibility while challenging carceral reliance. Instead of focusing solely on comprehension, I suggest approaching intelligibility as a process of navigating layers of social legibility, allowing for alternatives that better support survivors and resist carceral thinking.

1. Introduction

The political fight of feminist philosophers working on sexual violence has often been on the grounds of comprehension of experiences. How do we understand sexual violence as wrong, violating, and cruel in a social world that not only normalizes this violence but protects those who produce it? How do we make others understand experiences that we ourselves, for various reasons, struggle to verbalize? How do we garner outrage, care, and justice in our communities toward ending this violence when sometimes we struggle to understand the experience ourselves?

The arguments of this paper crystallized for me one night when I was out with some of my best women friends in Portland, Maine. We were rowdy and playful, happy to be together as we stumbled into a karaoke bar. The song "Goodbye Earl" by The Chicks

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came on, and the entire space filled with loud stomps, jeers, and shouts of glee from all the women in the bar as they sang along. The song tells the story of two friends, Mary Anne and Wanda, who concoct a vengeance plan against Wanda's physically abusive husband. Mary Anne and Wanda grow up together in a small town but go different ways after they graduate high school: Mary Anne moves away to a big city, and Wanda marries a local man, Earl. Earl is physically abusive to Wanda, and after Wanda files a police report against him, The Chicks sing, "Earl walked through that restraining order and put her in intensive care."

Mary Anne comes back to Wanda's bedside, and Wanda shares her experience with her friend. Together, the two friends hatch a plan to poison and kill Earl. The final stanza summarizes the end of the story as follows:

> The cops came by to bring Earl in
> They searched the house high and low.
> Then they tipped their hats and said "Thank you ladies
> If you hear from him let us know"
> Well, the weeks went by and spring turned to summer.
> And summer turned into fall.
> And it turns out he was a missing person who nobody missed at all.
>
> So, the girls bought some land at a roadside stand.
> Out on highway 109
> They sell Tennessee ham and strawberry jam.
> And they don't lose any sleep at night.
> Cause Earl had to die.

In the karaoke bar, the men in the room exchanged looks, singing with trepidation and clearly anxious at the emotional and intense citing of violence against Earl. The room buzzed with a joyful and mischievous energy. Karaoke tends to enable this sort of collective emotion, though this song and in this room something distinct was happening. The women in the room seemed to have formed a collective identification and emotional experience in relation to the song. The story of Mary Anne and Wanda, which has long been an anthem for women's friendship, was written by a man, Dennis Linde. But the version often invoked is a cover performed by the Chicks—a band perhaps best known for their vocal critiques against the Allied Invasion of Iraq and their public decrying of George Bush as a fellow Texan. As a result of these critiques, the Chicks were blacklisted from a number of public radio stations.

This moment in the karaoke bar made me feel as though something like a collective consciousness was emerging among us women. Philosophers love moments like these, and when I witness or experience one, I always want to untangle its conditions of appearance. Certainly, there was a shared sense of enjoyment of the music, and perhaps a shared understanding of the collective exhaustion and rage we felt at the ubiquity of violence we have experienced. But I felt as though the conditions of this sort of "collective effervescence," a term from Émile Durkheim, had to do with the textures of narration that each woman was inhabiting. Maybe we've been Mary Anne or Wanda. Maybe we've been neither, but we have loved someone who has. In any case, we are capable of existing inside of their fictional world with emotion. There was something safe about confessing to the joy of a vengeful murder, perhaps because it was a fiction.

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We could confess to the fantasy of killing our rapist/abuser and be giddy at the idea of doing it with a friend. Yet because the song is a dark comedy, a work of irony, we are kept at a distance from embodying the narrative autobiographically. This moment of ironic fictional disclosure creates the conditions of a kind of comprehension but holds at arm's length a confession of the desire to murder.

This is not a paper about whether to kill your abuser or perfect political solutions to end sexual or gender violence. This is a paper about the difficulty of self-comprehension and social comprehension of sexual and gender violence in our culture. The stakes are manifestly political: limited epistemological accounts lead to limited political solutions and narrative possibilities for survivors. For example, if a survivor experiences a form of gender or sexual violence that is not legible to the state as a crime, they often feel an impotence, that there is nothing they can do about the violence they endure. The lack of self-understanding emerges from an impoverished social and moral understanding, and survivors' lack of comprehension reproduces the cycle of conceptual impoverishment for all. Many feminist philosophers argue that the problem of intelligibility of these experiences is a product of oppressive social worlds. In what follows, I begin with the paradigm of intelligibility because it is the key to normative critiques. According to this paradigm, the way in which we understand difficult experiences helps us to figure out what we want to do. Further, if we have a view that the self is influenced by the social surroundings that they are situated in, and if those social surroundings are ones with oppressive norms against them, how does a person make sense of their experiences? Say, as many often do, you have an experience of mistreatment or harm due to an identity-based assumption, but you do not have the community or moral coherence to articulate that mistreatment or harm as a part of structural oppression. A personal experience I have with this occurred when I was one of the few women of color working in predominantly white feminist groups. Certain leaders in the group were antagonistic to internal critique. I had tried to offer those critiques of our feminist practices or values, but I was labeled as an "unsupportive" or "bad" feminist by the group. Without other women of color to communicate this alienation to, it was difficult for me to understand my feelings and instincts around my relationship to the group. Was I a bad feminist? Was my alienation my fault for having improper politics? Or was there a difficulty of intelligibility occurring?

One classic paradigm that feminist philosophers think about when dealing with these issues is feminist consciousness-raising, which is the sharing of personal stories to overcome the phenomenon of the lack of (1) self-understanding, (2) social understanding, and (3) moral understandings in regard to sexual and gender violence. What has happened in this process of sharing experiences in specifically feminist circles is a development of legal concepts: sexual harassment, marital rape, domestic violence, gendered expectations, etc. The goal in developing concepts is to render experiences of oppression intelligible and morally reprehensible both to that person and to their social surroundings.

However, in this paper I track how an unvariegated attention on social intelligibility reinforces a reliability on the very carceral structures that are most damaging for survivor self and social comprehension.[1] I offer a solution to this, by rethinking the concept of social intelligibility in light of the power of carceral structures. I argue that the intelligibility of self-comprehension and social comprehension of survivor experience is highly reliant on the experience of one's social legibility to institutions, communities, and individuals with power, and this insight is yet underdeveloped in the literature. While some feminist social epistemologists have held this insight, the goal of that work

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has focused on the democratization of knowledge production and diversification of concepts. This is a goal that I share as well, but the singular emphasis on "intelligibility" as a political win has flattened out dynamics of power that condition the space of intelligibility.

The motivation of this work is to show how large a role institution like the carceral state, racialization, dynamics of criminality and class play in the understanding and politics of redress of gender and sexual violence. In particular, Black feminist theory and decolonial feminism have shown that the experiences of violence that poor, undocumented, or racialized individuals undergo are either invisible to the police or visible in such a way that will render them, or their communities, vulnerable to more violence (Gilmore 2022; Kaba 2021; Schnalzer 2022; Wang 2012). In the afterlife of racial capitalism, slavery, and colonialism, the present narrative archetypes of "survivor" or "victim" in our legal discursive framework are inadequate to the task of producing justice for women who are subjected to gender violence. Thinking through these examples helps us to see that experiences often taken as having the property of "unintelligible" have a fundamentally relational character.[2] That is, survivors often may navigate self-comprehension of their experiences by imagining how their stories will appear to some particular audience. They navigate their experiences through what I propose to call "layers of legibility."

In the section 2, I lay out my contribution by examining how social epistemologists approach the problem of intelligibility and oppression. I illustrate that the problem of "unintelligible" experiences has been approached by considering taxonomies of different kinds of un/intelligibility, which implicitly relies too heavily on a binary between unintelligible/intelligible. In the section 3, I offer a positive account of how to think of un/intelligible experiences by thinking of intelligibility as maneuvering layers of social legibility. This is a relational account of intelligibility that engages how dynamics of power and discursive structures mediate the comprehension of survivor experiences. I contend that thinking of survivors as navigating layers of social legibility to render their experiences intelligible is a better epistemological paradigm. The metaphor of "layering" helps to illustrate how certain political solutions address the concerns for justice/redress articulated in survivor experiences more so than others. I conclude with a reflection on how this shift in epistemological paradigms towards social legibility can (1) help illustrate the harms that carceral solutions have on survivors' abilities to make sense of their experiences and (2) how often survivors navigate sense-making and moral and political reckoning through other layers of legibility beyond, in spite of, and against the carceral discursive layer.

2. Un/intelligible experiences

Social epistemologists frame forms of oppression by unpacking the social conditions of knowledge and ignorance. As such, women's experiences with gender/sexual violence are often used as an example for the ways in which "unintelligibility" is a form of oppression. Here I diagnose that feminist standpoint epistemologists have a sense that there is something inadequate to traditional orthodox epistemological frames of knowing, but need to include a relational account of knowing/obscurity into their pictures to properly attend to the phenomenon of understanding experiences of sexual violence.

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Feminist standpoint theory has often credited "personal experiences" as its source of critique and epistemic authority. This was a powerful and controversial philosophical move. Orthodox epistemology, inheriting René Descartes's mind/body dualism, denigrated the use of personal experiences for reasoning as subjectivist, and thereby unhelpful toward the development of objective moral or political criticism. Looking at this framework, one may ask: what does it mean for an "experience" to offer resources for political critique? (Scott 1991).

Standpoint epistemology was developed to discuss the ways in which our social world is a scaffolding through which one develops knowledge or determines what is true or false. It emerges specifically from a history materialist vision of the world, arguing that social ignorance stems from the Marxian idea of "false consciousness" (Hennessy 1993). Insights from this work are valuable for diagnosing some of the ways that oppression operates epistemically. When unjust, oppressive, or homogeneous structures organize a conceptual and discursive terrain, this terrain makes it so that oppressed people have trouble conceptualizing their own experiences of oppression, given that they have to understand their experiences through the lens of their oppressors (Medina 2013; Alcoff 2007; Mills 1997; Dotson 2013).

Sexual and gender violence is a significant example of such oppression. Many feminist scholars have written on the concept of "sexual harassment" as an example of women's experiences leading towards a collective critique. Part of the development itself of sexual harassment as a concept was a claim about epistemic justice: women were experiencing a kind of harm or violence that was not being recognized by dominant institutions of power. In order to diagnose what was going wrong Miranda Fricker developed the concept of "hermeneutic injustice" to explain situations in which an individual or a group does not have the concepts through which to interpret their experiences because of a systemic and oppressive lack of availability or production of these concepts (Fricker 2007). Her claim is particularly salient through examples she uses on sexual harassment and stalking, wherein these experiences were "unintelligible" both to the knower and the audience. Fricker's account illuminates that personal experiences are both evidence of oppression but also hermeneutically mediated by the oppression itself.

The concept of hermeneutic injustice relies heavily on a conceptual framework that identifies oppression as an experience of unintelligibility. That is, the knowers themselves do not have the concept that enables them to understand their own experience. This claim is not without its puzzles. What does it mean to claim that someone has some kind of feeling around an experience that is unintelligible? I take intelligibility to be the mechanism through which understanding itself is formed. In this sense, when one has an experience which lacks interpretive resources for it to be conceptualized, we may be saying that one occupies an epistemic space of unintelligibility. This focus frames "unintelligibility" as a *property* of experience—something that experience is or is not. As a consequence, the tendency of this epistemological approach places an emphasis on the unifying point that allows subjective experiences to become coherent, transparent, and able to be narrated. Contra this, I propose that un/intelligibility should be more perspicuously understood as relational and contingent on social relations.

In the rest of this section, I unpack different approaches to this concern and argue that the treatment of unintelligibility that arises in these arguments has not properly attended to the ways in which something becomes intelligible through social relations. The relational character of intelligibility would benefit from a focus on social legibility.

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2.1 Hermeneutic injustice causing unintelligible experiences

Miranda Fricker takes hermeneutic injustice to be a cause of having unintelligible experience. For Fricker, the ability to make sense of one's experience is an indispensable part of being a knower in social life. According to her, hermeneutic injustice occurs when there are no or less concepts through which one can make sense of experience. The oppressive dynamic emerges when a specific social group's hermeneutical resources—resources that would help the group make sense of their experiences—are structurally and systemically withheld or suppressed. (2007, 7).

Fricker argues that the feminist tactic of consciousness raising is a historical practice that resists and emerges from hermeneutical injustice.[3] Women who had undergone experiences of domestic violence, sexual harassment, stalking, and sexual violence would organize in both formal and informal capacities to discuss their experiences and these "speak out" groups were a bedrock for second wave feminism, as they allowed for women to organize collective critique. The consciousness-raising groups were a space in which women could share their "half-formed understandings," which would "awaken hitherto dormant resources that brought clarity, cognitive confidence, and increased communicative facility" (148). Fricker argues that these groups helped to overcome hermeneutic injustice by providing an experimental space for women to share stories and develop a coherent narrative together as to what was going on and what they wanted to do about it. This is a process of rendering something that was previously unintelligible (e.g., sexual harassment) intelligible.

Fricker discusses the example of Carmita Wood, an administrative assistant, who had repeatedly rebuffed the advances of a co-worker, a well-known physicist in the department (Fitzgerald 1990). Ultimately, the stress of her work environment was so severe that she became physically ill and had to leave work (Brownmiller and Alexander 1992). When Wood had tried to apply for unemployment benefits, her case was denied, because she did not have a concept through which she could apply the fault of her leaving her position to the harassment of a co-worker. Woods operates as a primary example of the oppressive effects of hermeneutical injustice: the speaker had a difficulty in naming and critiquing her experiences, to the point where it affected her physical well-being. At the same time, the concepts were not available via the unemployment office in 1975, so she was not able to receive the material benefits she would receive had she had a concept available to describe her experience.

Fricker also turns to an example from the novel, *Enduring love* by Ian McEwan, to describe a phenomenon of hermeneutic injustice wherein the main character, Joe, is trying to communicate with a policeman about his concerns about a man stalking him. Here is the exchange that Fricker uses in her example:

> "Are you the person being harassed?"
> "Yes. I've been . . . "
> "And is the person causing the nuisance with you now?"
> "He's standing outside my place this very minute."
> "Has he inflicted any physical harm on you?"
> "No, but he . . . "
> "Has he threatened you with harm?"
> "No." I understood that my grievance would have to be poured into the available bureaucratic mold. There was no facility refined enough to process every private narrative. Denied the release of the complaint, I tried to take comfort in having my

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> story assimilated into a recognizable public form. Parry's behavior had to be generalized into a crime. . . . impatience taking hold at last. "I'm sorry caller. This is not a police matter. Unless he harms you, or your property, or threatens the same he's committing no offence. Trying to convert you is not against the law." Then he terminated our emergency conversation with his own little stricture. "We do have religious freedom in this country." (1997, 156–57)

Fricker in later works discusses how these two examples serve as what she calls the "maximal" and the "minimal" cases of epistemic injustice. She defines the maximalist case as the Wood example, where "the individual is not in a position to make proper sense of her own experience even to herself" (Fricker 2016, 6). She identifies Wood's confusion, through Brownmiller, as evidence of the maximalist accounts of hermeneutic injustice—the true lack of concepts both to herself and to others. Joe's example would be emblematic of a minimalist case of hermeneutic injustice, wherein Joe "has no difficulty understanding [that he is being stalked]" and can "easily communicate to members of almost any social group," but the injustice stems from the social body which is the police being unable to "make proper sense of it" (4).

The main difference, in both cases Fricker discusses, is that Joe understands his experience, and Wood does not. Both struggle with inadequate social uptake. So, given this distinction, what does it mean to claim that they are experiencing an experience that is unintelligible to themselves, or their social surroundings?

2.2 Unintelligibility as a property of experience

In framing hermeneutical injustice as sometimes the cause of unintelligibility, we have boiled down a complex social ambiguity as described by the single property of "unintelligible." While "unintelligibility" is a useful term when diagnosing epistemic injustices, it has often led to a mischaracterization of what happens when someone is struggling to find the words to describe their experience, or when someone is anxious about the social reception of an experience.

The ground of Fricker's claims of unintelligibility is fraught. Rebecca Mason indicates this in her response to Fricker's article, where she pushes back against the view that Wood did not understand her experience, as evidenced by the fact that she "sought out feminist support" by attending the consciousness-raising group (Mason 2011, 7). Does unintelligible mean a state of total lack of understanding or conceptualization? A complete absence of sources of sense-making? Mason grants that perhaps the epistemic achievement for Wood is not so much the ability to understand the sexual harassment as wrong, but rather the naming of that harassment itself which leads to a collective critique. Kristie Dotson engages a similar critique, arguing that the framing of Wood's experiences as "unintelligible" runs the risk of negating the existence of a social epistemic sphere of meaning-making that often is formed by marginalized communities among themselves (Dotson 2012). Given that Fricker mainly identifies the gap in hermeneutical resources as in the "collective pool of resources," she devalues the epistemic resources marginalized groups produce in spite or in resistance to the dominant pool. By designating intelligibility as what is comprehensible to the sphere of the powerful, Fricker erases a complex social array of meaning-making that exists beyond those in power.

These critiques are significant and illustrate a tension at the heart of feminist social epistemology. How is it that feminist social epistemology advocates for the existence of

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hermeneutic injustice (a lack of conceptual resources) simultaneously with the idea that situated standpoints offer epistemic privilege?[4] To hold this contradiction, we need to rethink what one means by un/intelligibility. One approach is put forward by Emily Goldbeck, who creates taxonomies of unintelligibility. Goldbeck takes up Dotson's xcritique of Fricker to create a more complex understanding of un/intelligibility by developing "three accounts of unintelligibility." They do so specifically by examining pedagogy and asexuality (2024). In the classroom studies they analyze, Goldbeck identifies a set of pedagogical practices that render the phenomenon of asexuality unintelligible through (1) the deprivation of naming the term "asexuality", (2) the lack of sources taught and presented on "asexuality", and (3) As the hermeneutic conditions are inadequate toward allowing students to accurately understand experiences of asexuality. Goldbeck notes the concern raised by Mason and Dotson about the collapsing of the "collective pool" and the "dominant pool" in Fricker's framing of "unintelligibility," but holds that the classroom—in being hegemonic space of training students in comprehension and relying on a compulsory sexual dynamic—achieves a very specific and harmful kind of unintelligibility for students (2024, 3).

Another approach to variegating un/intelligibility is put forward by Nick Clanchy, who identifies that the stakes of intelligibility in hermeneutic injustice emerge when a material interest is not met (Clanchy 2024). Specifically returning to the example of Carmita Wood, Clanchy argues that Wood's failure to receive unemployment benefits emerges from ill-fitting concepts in relation to intelligibility to the labor bureaucrat. Thereby, there are two moments in Wood's experience of hermeneutic injustice. The first is (1) the lack of fitting concepts that enable Wood to understand the experience herself, which results in (2) Wood's inability to render the experience intelligible to the bureaucrat in such a way that allows her to receive unemployment benefits. Clanchy argues this material interest in being intelligible reveals not only a problem to be solved for hermeneutic justice, but an opportunity to address the oppression by examining the way that the welfare system recognizes cases.

Both Goldbeck's and Clanchy's arguments take up the question of un/intelligibility with instincts that I share. The two thinkers complexify the question of experiences in ways that move beyond the implicit binary of the un/intelligible to think about the role that power and institutions play in this in epistemic oppression. In my view, each of them is complicating intelligibility by discussing its degrees of social legibility, particularly to specific institutions. I refer to them as thinkers who are aware of the problem of relying on the binary of the properties of an experience as un/intelligible, but don't explicitly name the idea of social legibility as a part of their arguments. And this socially relational dynamic ought to be rendered as an explicit feature of their arguments about intelligibility.

Here is the major problem with the implicit binary: If "unintelligible" is taken as a property of an experience—say, a struggle to comprehend oneself or comprehend one's relation toward the social—and as a harmful thing to overcome, then the natural solution is to supply, name, and cite sources/words that allow the knower to traverse the "unintelligible" space toward the "intelligible" one. Yet, as Dotson reminds us, conceptual resources being lacking in a hegemonic dominant space doesn't mean they don't exist in another (Dotson 2012). Further, it seems to me that epistemic spaces, especially while stratified by power dynamics, are not so succinctly separate. They interact with one another; they operate in relation. Thereby, I take there to be an intervention needed on the level of reframing an implicit binary that emerges between

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unintelligible/intelligible when we talk about them as properties of an experience. As I clarify in the next section, we ought to see intelligibility as a process of relating between multiple linguistic and epistemic spaces.

2.3 Towards social relational accounts of intelligibility

There are two insights toward thinking about unintelligibility as navigating social relations of intelligibility. (1) The development of concepts always involves some kind of experimentation with different forms of intelligibility, and (2) the ability to rationalize/intuit relies on pre-existing epistemic "hinges." These two insights have been developed by feminist philosophers Alice Crary and Camilla Lobo. Crary argues that Fricker vindicates a neutral conception of reason to adjudicate ethical solutions of epistemic injustice, which implies an all-too-clean break from pre-existing epistemic spaces (Crary 2018). In an earlier paper, Crary identifies the ways in which sexual harassment emerged as a concept from pre-existing discursive arrangements, revealing that the development of the concept involves experimenting with different words to describe an experience. She argues that producing new feminist concepts emerges out of engagements with different epistemic spaces (Crary 2001). She writes:

> The appropriateness of the expression "sexual harassment" for naming a certain set of women's experiences is a function of the way the words "sexual" and "harassment" are used in other contexts. When feminists began talking about sexual harassment, they did not create a concept which had not previously existed, but rather insisted on a consistent and inclusive application of concepts whose use was widely accepted only in other contexts. (2001, 393)

Crary's framing of the construction of the concept of sexual harassment goes in direct opposition to the epistemological paradigm offered in Fricker's discussion. Instead of imagining the concept emerging from a space of unintelligibility, Crary claims that the concepts emerge from pre-existing discursive structures that allowed the feminist group to coin a term from an already-learned picture of language.

A similar insight can be found in the work of Camila Lobo, who argues that even extreme cases of "unintelligibility," which may involve lack of words, social recognition, and self-understandings, rely on epistemic "hinges" that ground us in a broader space of intelligibility. Lobo excavates agency in "uncontroversial" cases of hermeneutic injustice through a reflection on Wittgensteinian rational practices, to discuss the notion of a hinge commitment (Lobo 2022, 8). Wittgenstein illustrates his commitments to the social embeddedness of our rational practices through the image of a hinge, saying "if I want a door to turn, the hinges must stay put" (Lobo 2022, 14). Wittgenstein uses this metaphor to illustrate how, in practices of skepticism and doubting, we rely on hinge presuppositions to even begin the process itself. This hinge commitment may be something that we may or may not even be aware of, but it operates as the undergirding of our analytical and questioning process. The hinges—understood as objective (and pre-reflective) features of the world—operate as a way of connecting knowers (Lobo 2022, 14).

Lobo engages Wittgenstein's theory of hinges in order to forward a possibility of feminist politics and political agency even in the most acute spaces of epistemic impoverishment. While hinges are themselves flexible and up for social change, they offer a somatic or affective dimension to the features of rationality that can be valuable for feminist resistance. The hinges, while themselves socially embedded, dignify the

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multiple sources of knowledge and resistance of embodied and affective phenomena available to a person trying to make sense of things.

Crary and Lobo offer a picture of language that helps us to consider that the process of rendering an experience intelligible, either to yourself or to others, involves a reliance upon always already pre-existing social epistemic strata. It's not that unintelligibility is a property of experience, but rather a quality of maneuvering layers of legibility. We experiment to remedy a sense of mismatching between a concept and experience, or an intentional silence or obscuration that doesn't correlate with our epistemic hinges. Thereby, we can hold the insights of epistemic injustice while building toward a social relational account on unintelligibility by considering how this process is informed by dynamics of social legibility. In the next section, I develop an account of un/intelligible experiences by discussing a navigation of social legibility that gender and sexual violence survivors face.

3. Legibility: a relational dynamic of un/intelligibility.

Typically, the term "legibility" is used in relation to conditions of intelligibility under some kind of power dynamic. Someone can be "legible" to some kind of controlling or surveilling entity; behaviors can be considered legible or illegible (Brewster and Hine 2014; Ramadier and Moser 1998). Legibility is also typically used to describe something's readability—usually in the written form. The most dominant reference to legibility to power is from James C. Scott. Scott uses the term "legible" to indicate a type of statecraft. For Scott, legibility is a process of simplifying reality and a function by the state to control and manipulate the terrains and populations that they control (Scott 1998). The term is expansive, but for me the unifying logic to legibility is the arrangement of discursive terms and symbolic gestures that are comprehensible to a certain audience. When we try to understand an experience, we think about the current symbols of meaningfulness we have available to us, and we consider the coherence of those symbols to organize our feelings around our experience. To make something legible is to take it into account, to establish connections with the network of symbols and terms available to a subject, to illuminate its relationality vis-à-vis other experiences.

A stronger relationship is needed between what social epistemologists refer to as unintelligible/intelligible and social legibility. Instead of thinking about subjective experiences as having the character of being wholly intelligible or wholly unintelligible, I propose to look at them as apprehensible through the navigation of social legibility. In this section, I begin by elaborating the concept of intelligibility via social legibility. I then show how this process works when navigating hermeneutical injustice.

Intelligibility is typically thought of as a problem of comprehension, when something is unintelligible or becomes intelligible, that means we move from a lack of understanding toward a form of understanding. Inside of the process of understanding, we arrive at comprehension by reflecting on the different ways our experiences are socially legible to different entities, institutions, or audiences. Our understanding itself is framed by tsocial legibility to these audiences. This brings up questions of power and social recognition, and how significant a role these dynamics play, even in self-understandings, particularly in relation to issues of sexual harassment or sexual violence. Additionally, this reframing helps us understand a specific dynamic of survivors of sexual and gender violence, and further describes the harm of the political solutions that rely on the carceral state's recognition of violence. Indeed, processing one's experiences also implies making them visible or legible to some specific entity or authority. One

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example of authorities that dispense meaning is the state. When we are fired or quit our job, we think about the aspects of the experience of "being fired" that can allow us to acquire state legibility in order to get some benefits (e.g., unemployment). In this sense, the understanding of our experience is mediated by legibility to the state. I say legibility in part to evoke a discursive, semantic, or narrative realm to these dynamics of recognition/misrecognition. To be legible is to be able to be decoded/recognized/understood on the level of shared symbolic structures. What may be happening in these examples is that speakers are struggling to make their experiences legible to figures of authority.

A clarification is in order: by insisting on legibility, I do not mean to say that experiences are never *unintelligible*. The fact that people genuinely lack an ability to self-understand (or explain to others) an experience, or the fact that they fail to receive recognition for an experience of violence is a significant and common phenomenon. Social legibility does not intend to cover the whole sphere of intelligibility—there can be embodied, pre-rational, and instinctual forms of knowledge that help us to reckon with those experiences. However, I contend that, in describing a specific dynamic of intelligibility connected to some experiences of gender and sexual violence, we need to give un/intelligibility a social relational character—a character that social legibility can offer.

3.1 Discourse as constituting experience

In this section, I elaborate on what I mean by social legibility, which I propose to understand as recognizability and comprehension inside of our situatedness in discourse. This part of my claim, indebted to a Foucaultian account of discourse, emerges mainly from Linda Martín Alcoff's arguments in her text *Rape and resistance*. Alcoff brings in Michel Foucault's work to forward the idea that discourse plays a constitutive role in our experience (Alcoff 2018). Alcoff is working off a Foucaultian approach to discourse that is not only linguistic, but is material and structural. Specifically, discourses are conditioned by a set of observable material phenomena, "institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, mode of characterization" (Foucault 1972, 38). These material phenomena arrange and organize how subjects are recognized in discursive formations.

Specifically, Foucault describes the spaces in which the Subject (we may think of an individual, knower, person as synonymous with this term) appears as a specific heuristic, known as an enunciative modality (40). The rules that organize an enunciative modality within a specific discursive formation set the conditions for the "dispersion" of the subject (55). Thus, the subject is not a unifying function but is rather a series of discursive representations that either adhere to or resist the rules of a function. When we think of a person, we move beyond the framing of the "knower" who has access to "knowledge," and instead think of a Subject that is produced, regulated, controlled, and changing in relation to practices and forms of power.

Alcoff harnesses the Foucaultian approach to discourse to talk about the ways in which it frames not just our self-understandings and social comprehension but our experiences. She argues that the events of sexual violence are deeply influenced by the discursive context in which they occur. Social ideologies, such as "denial, feminine socialization, or patriarchal machinations," tend to set limits on the "exploration" and the negotiation of trauma of survivors. Meaning-making in contexts that reject these

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ideologies is systematically denied. Alcoff writes: "Listening to survivors means according to us the credible capacity to theorize complexity, as well as the ability to live with our sometimes-indeterminate conclusions." (2018, 61). Listening practices invovles taking seriously the discurive conditioning of survivor speech: "The main cause of our contemporary confusion about the actual nature and scope of sexual violence has to do precisely with the role of language in affecting experience … to theorize rape after Foucault calls on us to grapple with the constitutive nature of discourses" (16). Namely, the subject is an agent situated within a discursive arrangement that is contingent and historical. There are vocabularies, narratives, and hermeneutic concepts available to them based on their situatedness. To feel alienated from your experiences and unable to fully put them into words does not mean you are having a non-discursive response. Rather, survivors work to author their experiences from the discursive sociality in which they find themselves embedded. Perhaps the survivor may be experiencing severe symptoms of PTSD, another survivor may not. A survivor of a "grey case" may narrate her story differently than one of childhood sexual abuse. The experience of sexual violence may also differ across racialized context. A survivor may narrate her experience of violence through a particular classed lens, as is the case with many occurrences of gender violence in the workplace. Adopting the lens of a subject that is embedded in discourse helps us to see how legibility inside of that discourse influences dynamics of experiential un/intelligibility.

Johanna Oksala is much in agreement with multiple points in Alcoff's argument, but believes that there are resources in Foucault himself that help us to distinguish experience and discourse. Oksala argues that the genealogical analysis of medical/psychological/disciplinary discourse which Foucault performs across his corpus is predicated on the non-correlation between a subject's personal experience in relation to third-person "expert" discourse. In order to say that the dynamic of power/coercion even exists, we need to think that there is some subjective dimension of experience that is being coerced into that fit. And while Oksala does not claim that these subjective experiences are necessarily pre-discursive or nonconceptual, she notes that they are irreducible to discourse and produced by embodied practices that repeat themselves in both discursive and non-discursive spaces. She visualizes the subject maneuvering discourse and experiences as such:

> Instead of a clearly defined prism, we might think of it as a series of foldings: the subject must fold back on itself to create a private interiority while being in constant contact with its constitutive outside. The external determinants or historical background structures of experience and the internal, private sensations fold into and continuously keep modifying each other. (Oksala 2016, 57)

Both Alcoff and Oksala offer an account that explains how discourse interacts with experience. Alcoff turns to phenomenology to discuss the ways in which one self-makes in relation to discourse, while Oksala operates on a metaphor of folding, where the "folds" articulate a "private and internal" sensation. I am not certain that I believe that there is a privacy interiority of our selfhood that can be cleanly delineated from discourse. However, I believe that moments of mismatch, failure, and dissonances emerge from the contradictions we experience in our sensations and sense-making through the different discursive layering that constitutes our experiences.

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A powerful example of how social legibility influences survivor comprehension and narration embedded in a social world comes from Susan Brison. In her text *Aftermath: Violence and remaking the self*, she recounts both her experiences with sexual violence and the ways in which narrative and renarrations framed her unfolding understanding of the event. (Brison 2002) She writes:

> The first narrative of the assault was the ever-shifting one I told to myself while it was in progress—this is a nightmare, no, this is a rape, no, this is a murder. The next narrative was the one I invented, in the subjunctive mode, for my assailant during the attack. I wouldn't say a word about him, about the attack, I told him. I would say I was hit by a car. I said this in response to his saying "I have to kill you," to explain why he didn't have to. When I then heard a rustling from the road above and I screamed as loud as I could, he was enraged that I was not to be trusted. "*Menteuse*" he hissed, "liar." My tale returned to haunt me when, after I was picked up on the road and taken to a nearby farmhouse, I said I was attacked by a man, and I could hear someone muttering, "She must have been hit by a car." Someone else, who found my story more plausible, stressed that "the attacker couldn't be from around here." It turned out that my assailant lived across the street.
>
> My narrative varied as it was told to the farmer and his family, then to a police officer, a doctor, and the ambulance personnel, and, later, at the hospital, to Tom, more doctors, a psychiatrist, some gendarmes, my parents, a friend, another friend, then another. My story was shaped by what the listener needed to know most urgently, and, after a few days when I could breathe more easily, it expanded and contracted to fill whatever time was available . . . The listener's interest in the story provided the prompts, the questions, the responses, which, in turn, shaped the story. (106)

Brison tells and retells the story of her rape. Her audience is herself, the rapist, the neighbors, her husband, the doctors, and the police. Something new emerges in each retelling. Each new form of narration illustrates how that story is legible to each audience member, and what each audience member needs and takes from the story. In uncovering her experiences of social legibility, Brison both builds the comprehension of her experience to herself and holds the difficulty of comprehension in that experience. Thus, in traversing multiple spheres of social legibility, she maneuvers dynamics of un/intelligibility.

My view is that when a person has an experience that they are trying to comprehend, they exist inside/alongside many different layers through which and in which that experience can be narrated—both to themselves and to others—and they are finding themselves and connecting to others by navigating those layers. I take that, when a subject is coming up with language to describe their experience, they do so both in relation to themselves and to social spheres. Even when someone is coming up with self-understandings, they are always already thinking of and framing their experience in light of its social legibility. In the next section, I expand by discussing the distinct role that power, and specifically the carceral system, plays in modulating survivor experiences, by framing social legibility as layered.

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3.2 Navigating layers of legibility

Power structures legibility. This insight is one of my core commitments as to why we need to think of un/intelligibility as the navigation of social legibility. In Foucault, power works to regulate discourse through the regulative status of what he calls "doctrine." Doctrine, at least in how it relates to subjects, writers, and authors, involves a set of rules, structures, divisions, and rituals that surround the circulation and perpetuation of ideas, in order to specifically produce a regulative ideal. An author or a speaker is always situated within a specific function which they organize and fulfill or come against. He writes:

> Doctrinal adherence, however, involves both speaker and the spoken, the one through the other. The speaking subject is involved through, and as a result of, the spoken, as is demonstrated by the rules of exclusion and the rejection mechanism brought into play when a speaker formulates one, or many, inassimilable utterances; questions of heresy and unorthodoxy in no way arise out of fanatical exaggeration of doctrinal mechanisms; they are a fundamental part of them. But conversely, doctrine involves the utterance of speakers in the sense that doctrine is, permanently, the sign, the manifestation, and the instrument of a prior adherence—adherence to a class, to a social or racial status, to a nationality or an interest, to a struggle, a revolt, resistance or acceptance. Doctrine links individuals to certain types of utterance while consequently barring them from all others. Doctrine effects a dual subjection, that of speaking subjects to discourse, and that of discourse to the group, at least virtually, of speakers. (1972, 226)

Foucault writes that doctrine—and whether or not a specific speech act refers back to the regulative doctrine—controls and verifies that utterance. Power structures discourse in that one's ability to adhere to doctrine or resistant doctrine is organized by power. A Foucaultian approach has the merit to bring into view the question of power—the ways in which discursive formations have the power to deem something true or untrue, rational or irrational, moral or immoral. This power controls the terrain of recognizability.

In our historical and cultural moment in the United States and perhaps elsewhere, survivors of sexual or gender violence face a significant hegemonic discursive layer that informs how they make sense of their experience. That is the carceral discursive layer. Marie-Pier Lemay argues how the criminal legal system itself modulates the individual conceptions of a "good" and "bad" survivor, organizing our moral expectations of survivors themselves (Lemay 2023). Her article tracks the production of "survivor myths" that emerge out of the carceral layer of discourse (pressing charges, seeking state care, witness testimony, etc.). She cites Brison's own experience of giving a police report and courtroom testimony, where Brison argues that truth and therapy for the survivor are not the priority. Brison writes on giving the police report:

> I began to sense that things (including the "official story") were being rigged from the start, *in order to* get my assailant convicted. Some things were left out and others (such as the description of me as "sportive") were *added* to my narrative by the officer to make it more convincing. The point was not, exactly, to get at the truth, unless "truth" is defined purely instrumentally as that which will help accomplish a goal, in this case, the goal of getting the suspect convicted.

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Brison's story becomes regulated to fit within a narrative that would win the case. The layer of carceral discourse regulates itself so that certain kinds of stories succeed and certain kinds of stories fail. And this social reality is known and learned by every survivor who encounters that discourse. The carceral layer of discourse, by focusing on the success of the case and appealing to precedence, narrows the scope of discursive intelligibility of the survivor and replaces it with an archetypal production that relies on violent perpetrators and innocent victims. As Brison identifies, lawyers train both their defendants and plaintiffs to produce testimony that fits into specific archetypes. For survivors, they are forced to change their testimony to maintain their innocence and moral purity, often being discouraged from non-linear narration and ambivalent feelings (Lemay 2023, 32). In terms of the defendants or the accused they specifically avoid testimony that may invoke the archetype of the violent and often racialized criminal (Davis 1981). As Brison says, the truthful texture of a survivor experience is deprioritized in this system. These are the social discursive conditions we offer survivors for state-based legibility.

In my view, many survivors navigate the un/intelligibility of their experiences not only in relation to this hegemonic layer, but to many more layers. Navigating social legibility is a many-tiered process. The question is not neutrally "how do I appear before the other"—but rather "how do I appear before this cop?" or "how do I appear before my mom?" or "how do I appear before the Department of Labor?" Further, this type of cognitive evaluation may not even be explicit, but we may just decide, for implicit and subconscious reasons to do with social legibility, "this is the best way to describe my experience right now." My framework of the self as socially legible implies that these spheres of legibility intersect with each other. We are embedded in layers of narrative meanings that overlap one another. Some fit us like a glove and/or allow us to decide on actions that make sense to follow a given experience. Some we are uncomfortable in, or negotiating, or in-between. The point is that the political stake of the question has to do with the spaces of appearance inside a specific set of layers of legibility. So, the framing of legibility also immanently involves a terrain of ideology, that is, it forces us to ask the question: how does ideology control and frame a discursive space of comprehension?

The examples I just mentioned are meant to evoke an image of experiences as fundamentally multilayered in their forms of legibility. In this sense, there can be experiences that are not legible to oppressive homogeneous discursive realms, but still have their own specific space of concepts and a specific discursive formation. These layers are merely submerged under the oppressive ones, rendering certain experiences, stories, and lives "illegible" or "legible" to the oppressive realm.[5] As I mentioned, sometimes legibility toward the oppressive realm can be a means for achieving certain ends—state funding, recognition by a group or an institution. At times, it can even be pleasurable to be rendered legible. However, certain kinds of legibility can be both a misunderstanding of the experience itself, and potentially put lives and bodies in danger. To collapse intelligibility with legibility by an oppressive layer is to take for granted the complex ways in which being legible to the carceral layer can produce harm.

Let's go back to the example of Carmita Wood. Fricker identifies that Wood is suffering from an experience of unintelligibility for her experience of sexual harassment. Mason argues that Wood seems to have some conceptual understanding of her experience by seeking out community. But, as Clanchy reminds us, the action that brought about Wood's struggle for comprehension is her inability to fill out a form to file for unemployment. In this case, then, Wood was specifically dealing with a problem of illegibility to a certain layer, that is, the Department of Labor. So Wood was struggling to

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make her experience legible to a juridical layer, in order to receive unemployment benefits.

Think about Fricker's other example, the character Joe, from *Enduring love*, when he thinks to himself the following: "I understood that my grievance would have to be poured into the available bureaucratic mold." (McEwan 1997). In this case, Joe has a strong sense of what he is experiencing: he is being stalked. This experience is scary and threatening. The cop understands that Joe is afraid and is feeling stalked, but is unable to do anything about it because it does not fit into a "bureaucratic mold." Once again, this is a problem of legibility more so than comprehension. The cop needs to be able to tick a box in order to act against the stalker: he may very well understand what Joe is trying to get him to recognize, but the stake of the action relies on the form of legibility that stalking has to the state as a criminal offense.

When Fricker treats these two examples as cases of unintelligibility, she collapses Wood's and the cop's experience into a sphere of non-comprehension. However, it seems far more complicated than that. In my view, this collapsing raises two concerns: (1) It equates intelligibility *per se* as legibility to the state. In so doing it also vindicates legibility to the state as a politically just epistemic goal. While the utility of state legibility can be useful in the cases of Wood or Joe, there are many examples in which state legibility is not only a problematic political goal, but it can actually produce more violence and oppression. (2) By equating the levels of intelligibility and legibility to the state, Fricker's framework holds understanding in general in relation to state power, or the hegemonic social understanding. There are many senses of meaning-making, sense-making, and political normativity that emerge beyond the level of framing state recognition for survivors. Oftentimes, when you exist in an identity that is targeted by or in danger of policing, you have to create languages and norms outside of state visibility.

In connection to this issue, James Scott's work on hidden transcripts identifies the political importance of opacity. Scott argues that, in relations of subordination and domination, two distinct discursive spaces emerge, that of the public transcript, which he phrases as the "Open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (Scott 1990, 4). And there are hidden transcripts, which are "Offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, appear in the public transcript ... beyond the direct observation of the powerholders" (4). Sometimes, the lack of ability to find the precise vocabulary for an experience emerges out of an anxiety to become legible in a discursive sphere. Consider Fricker's emphasis that intelligibility to the police is an important hermeneutic goal. Many survivors have anxiety about having their experience become legible to the state. While the juridical level contains a set of hermeneutic resources that one could use to make sense of their experiences, claiming that one's experiences are "intelligible" only via that level is troubling, especially given how violent juridical legibility is for some marginalized groups. Perhaps we can think of an alternative survivor narrative, in which a survivor's story is told without placing her potential dependents or husband in the harm's way of a carceral state, but she still receives the benefits (protection, money, resources, etc.) that would come with that state legibility. Perhaps we think of the unemployment category that would allow the woman to register the sexual harassment as a reason she has left her job, without being forced to disclose or relive her traumatic moments and prove it as a viable reason to have left a position. The discursive structure of power mediates the dispensing of resources and protection, but through layers of legibility we look at the survivor narrative through the social mediation of all its implications—beyond just the dichotomy of intelligible and unintelligible.

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When I think of layers of legibility, I imagine different kinds of soil sediment in the layers of the earth. We can see different layers of sediment that have accumulated over time when we walk alongside the exposed layers in its cliff formation. I picture the layers as one digs their foot in the sand on the beach, seeing different colors and textures as toes are buried, or watches the tide push back one layer, revealing another. It's also haptic, one can feel the difference between sediments when wiggling one's toes. I see our social experiences as happening through layers of discourse that offer our ability to be recognized or marked in a specific kind of way. And like my big toe, a subject can wiggle through different layers. Different layers bleed into and co-constitute one another.

4. Rethinking practices of disclosure

In this paper, I proposed that we rethink the epistemological paradigm that discusses the dynamic of the un/intelligibility of experiences, particularly in cases of survivors of sexual or gender violence. I offered an account of intelligibility as necessarily connected to the navigation of layers of discursive, social legibility. I propose that sometimes survivors of sexual violence reflect on their narration's legibility between discursive layers. Either intentionally or unintentionally, survivors modulate and edit their narrations in relation to the layer in which and through which they want to achieve visibility. This act of comprehension is simultaneous to political action for survivors. They are constantly navigating their decision to disclose based on how it will be taken up by a given social sphere. By proposing the paradigm of layers of legibility, I want to open up a space of political action and possibilities for survivors beyond carceral feminist solutions.

This perspective involves rethinking the system of disclosure. Miranda Pilipchuk, in her article "Good survivor, bad survivor," critiques an instantiation of the #MeToo movement that relies heavily on disclosure in order to forward itself (Pilipchuk 2019). Pilipchuk argues that an iteration of the #MeToo movement relies on survivors publicly disclosing their experiences of sexual violence. Publicly disclosing has multiple functions: first to educate the public on the ubiquitous character of sexual violence, and second, to convey the "critical mass of survivors" in order to illustrate the prevalence and community of survivors. Pilipchuk criticizes an emphasis on disclosure as the only and necessary means of rational collective deliberation and political action.

Pilipchuk undermines the reliance on a feminist politics that prefigures disclosure as a necessary feature of being a "good survivor" (2019, 7). Instead, she presses on us the concern to think about the conditions of disclosure themselves, and what particular context each survivor is operating in. Is she running the risk of opening herself up to punishment or alienation from her community? Is she worried about perpetuating stereotypes about men in her community? Is she concerned about her or her perpetrator's visibility to the carceral state, and the effects of such a visibility? Pilipchuk doesn't necessarily offer us an answer to solve whether the right decision in every discrete moment will be to disclose or not disclose, but she does press on us the imperative that as feminists we ought to be taking in the social discursive conditions in which the survivors share speech, rather than shaming or moralizing them for their ambivalence.

The claims I make in this paper—that the experiences of those who experience gender or sexual violence are apprehensible through navigating layers of social legibility—emerge from the real-life engagement with these experiences. Abolitionist feminists have documented the effects the carceral system has had on survivors, and the

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ubiquity of sexual violence they face that emerges because of that system. (Taylor 2018; Davis 1981). Survivors are anxious, in the example of Brison, about twisting their narratives to fit into a form of testimony that is legible to the police report. Or as is the case for many women who are vulnerable to the police, such as Black women, migrant women, and sex workers, they are forced to hide their experiences from state legibility. Either way, the truth of the experience and the texture of the survivors' understanding is obscured. It's worth imagining what justice, care, or trauma would be if the forms of carceral legibility did not play such an enormous hegemonic role in survivors' self-understanding.

I return to my moment at the karaoke bar. "Goodbye Earl" is a reimagining of the layers of disclosure. Inside of the universe of the song, Wanda exposes her narrative to the police, and unlike so many survivors, is actually able to achieve some degree of juridical recognition, enough for her to get a restraining order from the police, at least. But this juridical visibility opens her up to further vulnerability since all it has the power to do is to punish Earl for breaking it, which is certainly not enough deterrence for his misogynistic rage as he "walks right through it" to continue to physically assault Wanda. The metaphor illustrates the illusory structure of safety that the carceral system offers our survivors. This line simultaneously points to the impotence of certain judicial restraints against domestic violence, in particular a man who is set on enacting revenge against a woman who attempted to use the carceral state against him to protect herself, and the culture of impunity that men are afforded in relation to domestic violence, even under juridical threat.

Wanda discloses her experiences to a source of intimacy and alliance, her best friend, and together the two imagine an outcome and form a justice that involves rebuilding a world where they can flourish. And they enact that outcome by killing Earl together, and obscuring that act from the cops. An interplay of disclosure and social legibility is illustrated in this song, showing the specific necessity for both disclosure and opacity. We get a story of politics, failed protection, and enacted protection in a single fictional narrative. There's another layer to the discussion of disclosure here, in which the song itself is a kind of confession to the crime. But given its function as a fictional piece of music, it does not get logged as a criminal confession for murder. Yet, in the karaoke bar, the enthusiasm and glee of owning and confessing an act of vengeance against a perpetrator of sexual and domestic violence is shared in a collective and safe sense.

I discuss the song not to say that killing your abusive ex-husband is radical feminist justice. I remain agnostic about that and it is quite beyond the scope of my paper! However, I wanted to point out the way the song signals an aesthetic moment of legibility in between discourses. It signals juridical legibility of both the victim statement and the confession to murder. But it also protects the characters in the story, and every woman who sings it, from the disciplinary function of the carceral apparatus which would witness the bodies that sing it as criminal if it were to speak at a different moment. The song honors the claim that there is potentially a space of intelligibility in between legibility, and that maybe that can be found in the space of friendship and intimacy between these two women.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank Alice Crary for this expression of my argument.

2 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting to articulate my account of intelligibility as relational.

3 For a more extended history of feminist consciousness raising, see Evans 1979.

4 This contradiction is central in feminist theory. A more extended version of the discussion emerges in Scott 1991; Oksala 2016, and "Women's Lives/Feminist Knowledge: Feminist Standpoint as Ideology Critique" by Rosemary Hennessy 1993.

5 Survivor sense-making in these conditions may be what Kristie Dotson (2017) calls a "submerged epistemology." Dotson develops the term to describe a phenomenon of Jane Crow dynamics, which are understood as experienced specifically through the lens of Black women, involves experiences that sit at the contradiction of over-determination and under-determination, hyper-visibility and invisibility (2017, 419). That is, Black women are subject to a plethora of narratives and concepts that determine them, but they also are subject to a specific form of conceptual impoverishment that does not provide for their first-hand experience of things. For Dotson, submerged epistemic layers are not necessarily in a realm of unintelligibility, but rather are produced by "process-based invisibility" (Dotson, 2013).

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