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ANDERSON'S ETHICAL VULNERABILITY

animating feminist responses to sexual violence

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During my first year of postgraduate study, I was fortunate enough to be supervised by Pamela Sue Anderson. At the time, I was working as a bartender in a pub to support my study and my research sought to abstract and critique my experience of being required to perform my white, middle-class femininity in this role through the performance of vulnerability. Front-facing bar work, I argued, was a form of affective labour where the embodiment of vulnerability was a carefully codified, subtly inscribed, requirement of the job. Job descriptions asking for “enthusiasm,” masculine management’s positive responses to heteronormative flirting practices, and customers’ demands for emotional labour through refrains such as “cheer up” – occasionally rewarded in tips – all pointed towards the necessity for a particular performance of femininity in order to succeed in the role. Taken together, I found that customer-facing service-sector roles were more readily occupied by white, middle-class women able to perform a specific type of femininity-as-vulnerability.

However, as my research took a critical perspective on the performance of vulnerability, what I encountered in my supervisions with Pamela, I now realize, countered the possibility of such a narrow understanding of the concept. As I, in a slightly cocky, enthusiastic, postgraduate manner, sought to systematize and codify vulnerability as gendered, racialized and classed, and to criticize the concept on such a basis, the intellectually enriching character of my supervisions and the friendship that ensued were made possible on the basis of Pamela’s own performance of vulnerability-as-generosity.

This idea that vulnerability cannot be reduced to such an overdetermined, negative

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meaning is one that Pamela not only performed as a friend, supervisor and committed member of the academic community, but began to theorize in her later work. In both life and writing, she demonstrated the transformational character of vulnerability: its implication in violence but also in generative relationalities such as love and friendship too. In “Arguing for ‘Ethical’ Vulnerability: Towards a Politics of Care?” (2017) Anderson writes: “let me note at the outset that my paper, instead of reducing vulnerability to an exposure to violence, *aims to say* something life-enhancing about vulnerability” (148–49). It is this contention – that there is a positive dimension to vulnerability, and one which is ethically and politically

significant – which I shall interrogate. My aim in this essay is to develop Anderson's insight regarding the transformational character of vulnerability, exploring it first in the context of sexual violence theory and then applying it to the recent #MeToo movement. My argument is that vulnerability as theorized by Anderson has an unacknowledged but significant contribution to make to the philosophy underscoring intersectional feminist responses to sexual violence.

vulnerability and violence

In recent years, Anderson has been one of a number of feminist philosophers reconsidering both the value of vulnerability and the nature of its relation to violence (see also Ferrarese; Gilson; Mackenzie; Murphy; Oliviero). The term, as Alyson Cole explains, has been resignified through an emphasis on its universality and generative capacity (260). Influential in this turn, for Anderson among others,¹ has been Judith Butler's articulation of a "common' corporeal vulnerability" (*Precarious Life* 42) as the potential ground for a universal ethics of non-violence. For Butler, the condition has the capacity to furnish "a sense of political community of a complex order" (22) through its exposing of the interconnectedness and interdependence of embodied existence. "From where," she asks, "might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?" (30). For Butler, then, attending to vulnerability has the potential to transform how we respond to the violence that vulnerability permits. The possibility of non-violence² emerges "from an understanding of the possibilities of one's own violent actions in relation to those lives to whom one is bound" (Butler, "Reply" 194) and thus recognition of the vulnerability of the Other is central to a politics of non-violence, as this recognition constitutes the means by which interdependence becomes apparent.³

Anderson builds on Butler's reconceptualization of the relationship between vulnerability and violence, exploring what such an ambivalent

ontology of vulnerability may facilitate for a politics of accountability. For Anderson, if, as Butler argues, vulnerability includes susceptibility not only to violence but a whole host of more positive intersubjective affective relations ("'Ethical' Vulnerability" 147), then what connects the range of experiences that result from vulnerability is transformation.

Anderson elaborates that there are two levels to vulnerability: the phenomenological and the ethical. The phenomenological level is close to Butler's ambivalent corporeal ontology. It refers to the "materially specific lived experiences of intimacy, as openness to love and affection, while admitting affection could generate negative effects of fear, shame or rage" (147–48) and echoes Erinn Gilson's conceptualization of vulnerability as "a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting others in both positive and negative ways" ("Vulnerability, Ignorance, and Oppression" 310). The transformation at this phenomenological level is largely unintentional and unwilling. Phenomenological vulnerability is both an effect of and directs us towards the ontological character of vulnerability, and as such I will occasionally refer to "ontological vulnerability" in place of "phenomenological vulnerability" in order to maintain a direct dialogue between Anderson and contemporary feminist philosophers who are engaging and building on Butler's thought.

In contrast to the uncontrollable character of phenomenological vulnerability for the subject experiencing it, at the ethical level this openness can be actively mined in the pursuit of positive relations with others. Anderson writes that "an ethical level of vulnerability would be an openness to affective relations between subjects who interact; ethical openness to change and to being changed would be positive insofar as enabling relational (overcoming asymmetrical) accountability"⁴ ("'Ethical' Vulnerability" 148). Thus ethical vulnerability is an active, necessarily reciprocal, practice of embracing transformation in self and others, derived from a more foundational vulnerability of the constitutive corporeal variety present in the work of Butler and Gilson. Accountability, as will become

apparent, ensues as the means by which ethical vulnerability can be practised.⁵

Rather than posing a static actor, one who rationally decides between a more or less morally good course of actions, as the basis for the ethical subject, the constitutive character of vulnerability, as a condition of transformability, implies a becoming subject whose existence is always in excess of any action they have done or been subject to. The ethical character of this subject lies not in their capacity to choose between a more or less harmful or virtuous course of action but in their openness to being changed: “what I advocate as distinctively ethical vulnerability acknowledges and activates an openness to becoming changed,” writes Anderson, and “this openness can make possible a relational accountability to one another on ethical matters” (“‘Ethical’ Vulnerability” 150). Accountability as a basis for justice presumes that victim and perpetrator (i) are temporary ascriptions and (ii) that moving positively beyond the injustice involves both parties engaging with, listening to and affirming one another in their complexity. As such, a subject characterized by openness to change through others is characterized by exactly the same dynamic, relational ontology that engenders the possibility of accountability.

This ontology of transformation gives rise to two ethical imperatives. Regarding the self, it compels one to open oneself to such change, “enabling forward movement in life, moving from what we take ourselves to be to what we are becoming” (149), and regarding the Other, it entails carving a space for forgiveness of a complex order. If, for Derrida, the impossibility, or at least paradox, of forgiveness – “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” (32) – lies in the unchanging ethical content of the act to be forgiven, for Anderson, it is not the ethical content of the act but of the actor which occasions the possibility and importance of forgiveness. If the ethical subject is one underscored by an ontology of transformation, then responding to an act of violence entails focusing not on the unchangeable event but on the actors. Securing a future for a subject based on what they have done, or have been subject to, fixes the future

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from the perspective of the present. By contrast, Anderson’s focus on the actors involved in an instance of violence instead of the act itself exemplifies Sedgwick’s reparative insight that “to realize that the future may be different from the present” necessitates entertaining such “profoundly [...] relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (146). Ethical vulnerability entails a dynamic temporality which holds out the reparative possibility for renewed relationality between those where harm has been done.

Anderson appeals to vulnerability in the context of violence in order to underscore a politics of ethical responsiveness. Openness to being changed is a relational ontology, it is through others that transformation takes place, and it is from this basis that accountability becomes central to responding to violence: “this openness can make possible a relational accountability to others on ethical matters” (“‘Ethical’ Vulnerability” 150). Thus if injury has taken place, “ethical vulnerability opens up an opportunity to restore justice, or to repair, the horrendous pain of wounds (vulnerabilities) [...] with relational accountability” (153). Accountability therefore becomes central to ethical responsiveness, and is a precondition for forgiveness (“Justice and Forgiveness” 117). Anderson has applied this ethics in the context of what she terms “intimacy wounding,” the situation in which a person has experienced “intimate violence,” which “denotes physical, sexual, emotional, financial, psychological, and/or spiritual abuse which is perpetuated [*sic*] by, for example, adult males on adult female partners in close, personal relations” (116). For her, in such instances, ethical accountability must be prioritized in the pursuit of restorative justice. In what follows, I extend the application of ethical vulnerability, contending that Anderson’s insights are highly relevant to the difficult question for feminists of how to respond to sexual violence.

feminism and sexual violence

Sexual violence represents both a principal concern for feminists and a challenging topic

to respond to. It is a principal concern because it is as gendered and sexed beings that sexual violence happens. Whilst there are divergent theories on the nature of sexual abuse – is it a question of sex or power for instance? (see Cahill 15) – it is empirically the case that trans, non-binary and female-presenting individuals experience sexual violence at disproportionately high rates across the world (see Teays 132; James et al. 198). As such, gender is clearly a relevant factor. In addition, the choice of sex as the vehicle for violence again makes it an issue for feminists, given that one of the most enduring legacies of feminisms since the abolition movement has been the politicization of sex as a microcosm of broader power relations (see Rutherford; Millett).

Yet sexual violence is also a highly contentious issue for feminists. The difficulties it raises fall into two categories:

- (1) problems of identification;
- (2) problems of response.

Problems of identification include defining sexual violence and naming one's experiences as sexual violence. The lines between rape, sexual assault and non-problematic sex are not clearly delineable in advance. Where some theorists have argued for a continuum approach in identifying violence (e.g., MacKinnon; Dworkin; Gavey) others have advocated a "victim-centred approach" where the experience or testimony of the victim⁶ is what counts (e.g., Bourke; Cahill; Mardorossian). Whilst many writing from academic feminist perspectives are critical of the mainstreamed liberal contract approach where the presence of "consent" determines the line between good and bad sex (e.g., Alcoff; Razack, "Consent to Responsibility" 893), for others the widely recognized feature of this approach renders it at least politically useful (see Hunter and Cowan). These are important discussions. However, in this essay what I am pursuing is the usefulness of Anderson's "ethical vulnerability" for addressing problems pertaining to the second question: once a wrong has been identified, how should feminists respond?

Questions pertaining to how to respond to sexual violence traverse feminist theory and activism. Feminist theorists have grappled with the question of how to avoid essentializing the identities of those involved in an instance of sexual violence by reducing them to their status as "victim" or "perpetrator" (Lamb 3). The insights of deconstruction highlight the fallaciousness of such tidy, oppositional categories in the first place; meanwhile, psychoanalysis has demonstrated that such discrete, unchanging subject positions are neither stable nor reflective of an individual's subjectivity. Descriptively, too, these categories are idealized oversimplifications which have the unintended effect of obscuring the ways in which perpetrators frequently have a history of victimization themselves; meanwhile, victims are complex individuals who can rarely meet the standards of "innocence" associated with membership of that group (Lamb 158; Phillips 67). The category of "victim" has come under additional scrutiny for its apparent evacuation of women's agency, with some posing the term "survivor" as a less passive alternative (Mahoney 59). In addition, the racialized, classed norms by which an individual may be intelligible as a victim at all have also led to problems with the category (Phipps, "Rape and Respectability"). All this is to say that feminist theorists have struggled to theorize how to respond to sexual violence, even once it has been established that an injurious event of this nature has occurred, given the ontological and political questions that such discourses raise.

Feminist activists face a different, although not unrelated, set of problems in responding to sexual violence. These pertain to what "justice" might involve. Whilst some, typically white, feminists have argued for greater rates of prosecution and longer sentencing lengths for perpetrators in order to address the patriarchal undervaluing of women's lives and the lack of belief that accrues to women's testimony, these strategies have been met with convincing criticisms. Anti-carceral feminists point to the structural racism of the justice system and question the investment in a prison complex which has no proven record of addressing crime or

violence (Davis 25). Indeed, in the case of sexual violence, the move to incarcerate is almost a move to return the initial violence in a different scene, given the ubiquity of physical violence, including sexual violence, in prisons. Jackson elaborates that “incarceration is itself an act of racialized sexual violence, one enabled by the mobilization of fantasies of violent black male sexuality” (198). Given that few inmates will leave prison without having experienced any physical violence, and studies on the problem in men’s prisons in the United States have reported the rate of “sexually coercive behaviours” to be as high as 20 per cent (Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson; Wooden and Parker), the idea that prison addresses violence has been found wanting. It seems that incarceration amounts to an outsourced justice of revenge, and one with no tangible benefit for the victim, the assailant or the community. To the contrary, in an economy in which violence begets violence, if anything, carceral solutions seem to contribute to the problem. The most readily available response to sexual violence then, the state and its penal complement, the prison, is one which is particularly fraught for feminists given its discriminatory and violent operation (Gilmore 14). In short, given that “the criminal justice system is now far more racist than it is sexist in adjudicating victim claims” (Haaken 785), responding to sexual violence through prison sentences is a highly contested move.

ethical vulnerability and sexual violence

Whilst I have demonstrated that Anderson posits a necessary link between ethical vulnerability and accountability, how does such an ethics inform the question of how to respond to sexual violence? In the remainder of this essay I propose that Anderson’s ethical vulnerability can allay some of the difficulties just outlined facing both the academic and the activist attempts to *respond* to sexual violence. To summarize, these pertain first to the problems of essentializing the categories of victim and

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perpetrator and second to the ineffective and racialized logic of the pursuit of judicial justice. If ethical vulnerability is able to address both these problems, then it must also be tested against the following minimum requirements for a response to sexual violence to be intersectional: (i) power relations rather than the cultural or social identities of the actors involved are appealed to, and (ii) it refuses the privileged position of valuing protection for some over protection for all.

To elaborate on each of these intersectional requirements, identifying power relations precludes individualized, pathologized explanations for sexual violence which function to obscure what Nicola Gavey refers to as “the cultural scaffolding for rape” (2) in their exceptionalizing of the incident. Focusing on power relations also refuses the logic of “cultural deficit” (Razack, “Imperilled Muslim Women” 131) explanations for sexual violence, where if the actor was from a minority culture then culture rather than gender is put forward as an explanation. Given that intersectionality insists on a “consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power” (Cho et al. 787), responding to sexual violence intersectionally necessitates illuminating and interrogating such interlocking vectors of oppression. Second, refusing the protection of some over the protection of all means that to oppose sexual violence entails opposing the institutions that foster and enable it. Given the disproportionately high rates of violence in prison, this entails a critique of the prison-industrial complex alongside a critique of sexual violence (see Phipps, “Feminists Fighting”). Thus, in addition to eschewing essentialism and judicial-based justice, responding to sexual violence intersectionally entails identifying power relations and refusing the displacement of violence from some bodies onto those deemed more socially disposable.

Anderson’s ethical vulnerability provides a framework for responding to sexual violence which addresses the problems that feminists have faced and incorporates these fundamental intersectional criteria. Ethical vulnerability entails eschewing essentialism as appealing to a common, corporeal vulnerability is an

inherently non-binary move which dispels the possibility of discrete categories of victim and perpetrator categorized by vulnerability and invulnerability respectively. Discrete, oppositional categories such as these also tend to be static ascriptions, a characteristic that Anderson's ontology of transformation inherently repudiates. For Anderson, neither victim nor perpetrator can be conceived as pre-determined categories which means that, for embodied, living beings, becoming does not end with an instance of sexual violence, no matter how serious, damaging and exploitative.

This reparative, anti-essentialist insight, that neither victim nor perpetrator can be reduced to such fixed identities, is relevant too for addressing the problem of denying women's agency. As a fixed, negative state, "agency is regarded as incompatible with vulnerability, which is conceived as a hindrance, and thus, by definition the vulnerable person is weak, incapable, and powerless" (Gilson, "Vulnerability and Victimization" 74). However, by reconceptualizing vulnerability as an openness available to all, Anderson intervenes in such a binarizing logic, underscoring the denial of women's agency and its complementary logic of paternalism.

In addition, collapsing the dualistic logic of vulnerable/invulnerable underscoring categories of victim and perpetrator is relevant for addressing the politicized and racialized means through which the category of perpetrator will become fixed. Bitsch finds that in Norwegian rape cases, "nationality or ethnicity is mentioned as a relevant fact when it involves minority men but not majority men" (946). As a result, where minority men are subject to "stigmatic" shaming by society, majority men are subject to "reintegrative" shaming. Extrapolating from her findings indicates that whether the identity of a perpetrator becomes fixed and essentialized will often be in keeping with racialized practices equating non-whiteness with sexual threat. This reproduces a history of racialized masculinities being framed as threats to the white female body (Ware 4–5), which comes to stand in for the nation, and is in keeping with a US-centric logic of "sexual exceptionalism" (Puar 79) where to be a racial

other is to be a sexual other. The benefit of Anderson's appeal to a common vulnerability here lies in the ability of such a move to dismantle the ontological grounds for an equation between invulnerability, racialized masculinity and sexual threat. If the perpetrator was not predetermined as such, on account of their individual pathology or racialized/sexualized otherness, then we are forced to ask – in keeping with Anderson's becoming subject – how they came to be, and how they could be otherwise. As such, the related problems, when responding to sexual violence, of essentializing the categories of victim/perpetrator and appealing to a justice system which perpetuates race and class inequalities are addressed by a relational ontology in which the subject is always becoming and accountability rather than blame is prioritized.

When Anderson opposes relational accountability to asymmetrical accountability ("Ethical' Vulnerability" 148, 151) she is gesturing towards the place of power relations in ethical relationships, which may serve to favour some over others, highlighting the necessity of attending to and acknowledging these as a precondition for ethics. Similarly, in refusing individualized or cultural-deficit explanations for violence, which are underscored by dichotomized accounts of vulnerability – some are vulnerable and deserving of protections, others predatory and deserving of prosecution – Anderson redirects a focus towards the power relations that produce victims and perpetrators in any one instance. Ontological vulnerability highlights the shared, largely ambivalent character of the condition. Yet if, at the level of lived material experience, some are disproportionately liable to negative instances of vulnerability (i.e., violence), then this raises the question of what social, political and economic conditions are at work. Unequal vulnerability to violence, when not understood as a property of a particular group, emerges as an effect of concrete institutional policies and power inequalities. For instance, the vulnerability of transwomen to violence in public spaces is an outcome of discourses, such as those which frame trans subjecthood as a question or

debate, which circulate alongside concrete policies of marginalization such as restricted access to services, employment and medical support. Together, these combine to make public space a highly dangerous environment for transgender individuals (Namaste). Applied to sexual violence against gender non-conforming individuals, transwomen and cis-gender women, the institutional enablers of rape culture, the discourses that surround it as well as the systemic underpinnings of these – specifically patriarchy and heterosexism – are brought into relief by an approach which neither naturalizes nor negates the unequal distribution of negative instances of vulnerability. Anderson’s ethical vulnerability has intersectional insights, then, as it directs a focus away from individuals or social identities and towards power inequalities instead. Discrepancies between the shared ambivalent ontological vulnerability and the more decisively negative lived experiences of the condition point to the necessity for an intersectional critical analysis of power. For these to be fully realized, of course, more context-specific detail is required and the essay will end with one such application of Anderson’s thought to contemporary sexual violence politics.

Anderson’s contention that accountability follows from her characterization of the ethical subject is one which also resonates with intersectional feminist sexual violence politics. Recognizing, as Wendy Brown also argues, that the call for judicial redress “casts the law in particular and the state more generally as neutral arbiters of injury rather than as themselves invested with the power to injure” (27), women of colour feminists have long sought extra-judicial avenues for justice (see Davis 25; Thuma 55; INCITE!). Lisa Marie Cacho highlights that “when [American] law targets certain people for incarceration or deportation, it criminalizes those people of color who are always already most vulnerable and multiply marginalized” (Cacho 4), and her arguments regarding the racialized inequality governing criminalization extend globally (Penal Reform International 16). As such, responses to violence which position the state as innocent with regard to the

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production of violence have been found wanting. In their place, community accountability has emerged as a key component of intersectional, transformative justice movements led by women of colour and queer anti-violence activists seeking alternatives to state-led responses to violence (Generation Five; Armatta 15).

Aspiring towards accountability and transformation rather than blame and incarceration is both central to the reparative logic that holds out the possibility for renewed future relations and one that has always been central for queer communities and communities of colour who seek to protect their members from the violence of larger society, at the same time as needing to address violence from within the community (see Collins; Schulman). Anderson’s contribution to this rich history of women of colour organizing is that vulnerability is both an unwilling, phenomenological condition and a promising ethical practice. Taken together, Anderson offers an account of accountability, where the rationale for accountability is derived from the characterization of the ethical subject herself. As such, she expands the rationale for accountability as a response to violence by locating it in the transformability of the subject, thereby providing the philosophical foundations for an accountability oriented approach to justice. I will end with an examination of the recent #MeToo movement in order to test these arguments regarding responsiveness in light of recent developments in sexual violence politics.

ethical vulnerability and the #metoo movement

In recent years, the question of responding to sexual violence has become an increasingly pertinent one. Since 2017, the landscape of sexual violence politics has become saturated by the #MeToo movement. The movement in its viral version emerged in 2017 after the actor Alyssa Milano penned a tweet encouraging spreading the hashtag #MeToo. This was a phrase first used by African-American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, who had been working in

communities of colour to counter the stigma and silence around sexual violence and to build a community of survivors equipped and empowered to support one another. Burke's coinage of the phrase and longstanding activism has been, if belatedly, widely recognized. However, the viral movement is one which departed from Milano's tweet and has a political life that exceeds, and does not always complement, the politics and ambitions of Burke's grassroots movement. As such, where I speak of the viral or mainstream version, it is to the aftermath of Milano's tweet – the sharing of stories online and the media reporting of the most high-profile accusations – that I refer. By contrast, when I discuss the grassroots Me Too movement, I am referring to Burke's community of colour-focused sexual-violence activism both before and after the viral movement took off.

The mainstream movement was catalysed into existence in 2017. Milano's aim in penning the tweet was to make apparent the widespread character of sexual harassment and sexual violence after the issue became newsworthy following high-profile sexual-abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein from women in the film and media industry in October 2017. The hashtag went viral. "In just one year, the #MeToo hashtag has been used more than 19 million times on Twitter alone" (Chan in Burke, "Our Pain") and has circulated in eighty-five countries beyond the Global North.⁷ Indeed, "#MeToo has become a global phenomenon, spreading from the United States to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Israel, India and beyond" (Davis and Zarkov 3). Sara Ahmed's image of the domino effect that follows when the lid is lifted on what it is permissible to articulate in the context of sexual harassment – "a 'drip drip' becomes a flood" (30) – is particularly apt, as millions of women across the world retweeted the hashtag, often accompanied by stories or discussion of their experience(s). Now, over eighteen months after Milano's first tweet, the movement or stories associated continue to occupy headline news regularly, and media commentators have framed it as marking a "watershed moment" or signalling "a reckoning," shifting the terms

of sexualized interactions between men and women, particularly in the workplace.⁸

Feminist commentators have been less emphatic in their response to the movement, pointing towards the "ambiguities and dilemmas" (Zarkov and Davis) that the viral movement has raised. Interestingly, despite the mainstreaming of feminism in recent years, #MeToo is being presented as a movement independent of feminism (Serisier 94). Whilst, as Ann Pellegrini writes, "Experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault are hardly new. Nor are feminist movements to confront such misconduct new. Even more importantly, disagreements among feminists are not new either" (262), media engagements with the topic suggest otherwise. Mainstream reports participate in an "outrage economy" (Phipps, "Reckoning Up" 1) which frames sexual harassment as a recently discovered problem. This functions simultaneously to depoliticize the issue as it is dislocated from a structural analysis of power relations and erase past lives of feminist sexual-violence activism.⁹

Moreover, in its viral and mainstream iteration, the movement meets neither of the criteria for an intersectional sexual-violence politics laid out above. As Virginia Goldner observes, "every time it seems we have exhausted our supply of top-tier sexual harassers, another one bites the dust" (235), reflecting the dominant currency of the discourse as a movement of identifying perpetrators rather than illuminating power relations. In addition, #MeToo prioritizes the protection of those with a voice over those without. Stories of sexual assault in prisons and detention centres, for instance, do not appear within the discourse. As such, rather than illuminate the broad tapestry of violent sexual relations and the accompanying institutional policies and frameworks which enable it, the movement in its most media-friendly version effaces such interrogation of the "broad structures of power" by focusing on "individual bad apples case by case" (Duggan, "The Full Catastrophe"). Indeed, whilst in the United Kingdom, for instance, widespread cuts to women's refuges are largely ignored, one is compelled to question

the investment of media outlets and their readers in stories of sexual assault with their accompanying images of white feminine vulnerability, which arguably trade in the same violent eroticization which enabled such abuse in the first place (a question posed by Rose).

In fact, in as far as the viral movement has focused on testimony and “speaking out” (Serisier), it has offered little in terms of a politics of how to “respond” to sexual violence. This marks a departure from Burke’s movement, where “empowerment through empathy” was at the centre of a movement of and for survivors.¹⁰ In what follows, I will argue that in contrast to the contentions raised by the viral version of the #MeToo movement, examining Burke’s grassroots movement in light of Anderson’s “ethical vulnerability” framework illuminates much of its strength. Consequently, I propose that the two can inform one another, highlighting key philosophical and practical priorities for the pursuit of intersectional feminist responses to sexual violence.

Tarana Burke’s initial formulation of the Me Too movement was about creating a community of survivors who could find strength in the knowledge that they were not alone. “Me Too,” she explains, “became the way to succinctly and powerfully, connect with other people and give permission to start their journey to heal” (Burke, “We Spoke”). Ethical vulnerability is present in the way that Burke’s emphasis is on the transformation of the victim so that in naming an injustice they can begin to move past it: “we want to turn victims into survivors and survivors into thrivers” (Burke, “Empowerment through Empathy”). The agency as well as the ontological becoming of the subject of violence is at the heart of Burke’s distinctly non-paternalistic politics. Ethical vulnerability is also apparent in the potential for repair between perpetrators and victims:

people who are perpetrators, (which is largely men) need to be talking about accountability and transparency and vulnerability. They need to be standing up and saying, “this is what I’m going to do to change”, or, “I

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apologise”. Everybody needs to do their work on their own. (Burke, “We Spoke”)

In focusing on the potential for both victims and perpetrators to move past an injustice, Burke’s Me Too movement exemplifies a pragmatic yet radical politics of responsiveness to injury.

As such, Burke’s activism around responding to violence employs the insights of ethical vulnerability regarding embracing transformation of both self and other. In contrast to the mainstream movement with its vilification campaigns, Burke explains that “The reality is, if we really want to really look toward ending sexual violence, we have to examine all of our behavior [...] This is across the board, however you identify on a gender spectrum” (“Our Pain”). Change requires interrogating the way in which the scaffolding for structural vulnerabilities is located throughout the fabric of quotidian behaviours and institutions; in other words, complicity in rape culture is social rather than individual. The logic of Burke’s anti-violence politics is that of “an economy predicated on the principles of transformative empathy” (Rodino-Colocino 99). Thus, as with Anderson’s “ethical vulnerability,” Burke’s politics of “empowerment through empathy” shares an ontology of transformation which makes possible a reparative responsiveness and avoids essentialized ascriptions of victimhood or blame.

Burke’s Me Too movement is intersectional in its foregrounding of complex power relations. Indeed, she is operating in the long history of women of colour anti-violence organizing in which to appeal to the state is to endanger the community. As Burke highlights,

There are nuances in our community around sexual violence that are informed by centuries of oppression and white supremacy, but we have to confront them. Across the board there’s shame, but in our community there’s shame on top of fear on top of ostracization – there are layers of things we have to unpack. (Burke, “#MeToo Should Center”)

It is in this sense that it serves an intersectional feminist goal, attending to the meaning of

sexual violence within a specific history and community and focusing on both the confluence of power relations as well as the way in which they are lived. Burke emphasizes that making accountability the prerogative of the few obscures the systemic character of sexual violence. Yet, at the same time, she acknowledges the nuances involved in attending to instances in their particularity:

Narrowing our focus to investigations, firings and prison can hinder the conversation and the reality that accountability and justice look different for different people. We need to refine our approaches for seeking justice to reflect that diversity. Sexual violence happens on a spectrum, so accountability has to happen on a spectrum. And that means various ways of being accountable are necessary. (Burke, "On the Rigorous Work")

In this way, Burke refuses to prioritize the protection of some over the protection of others. Accountability is as widespread as the vulnerability that demands it, yet both are, as Anderson also highlighted, "materially specific, lived experiences" ("Ethical Vulnerability" 147) which demand sensitivity and cultural and historical awareness.

In directing her focus to power relations and all, rather than the most privileged, victims, Burke criticizes the way in which, in the mainstream movement, certain experiences are amplified at the expense of others. In 2018, she says that whilst she launched the Me Too movement in 2006 "because I wanted to find ways to bring healing into the lives of black women and girls [...] those same women and girls, along with other people of colour, queer people and disabled people, have not felt seen this year" (Burke, "On the Rigorous Work"). Intersectional responses to violence necessitate attending to the experiences of all, something the mainstream movement, with its dualistic postulation of some as vulnerable, others as perpetrators, has failed to achieve. By contrast, Me Too as a term for connecting survivors with one another has the capacity to function, as Lee and Webster explore, as "a multimodal mobile social

amplifier" which involves participants simultaneously "handing [themselves] over to the multitude and the heterogeneous" (250). Indeed, Burke's movement utilizes "transformative empathy" which Rodino-Colocino explains "promotes listening rather than distancing or looking at speakers as 'others'. It requires self-reflexivity and potential transformation of one's own assumptions" (97). Empathy for Burke is thus a transformative intersubjective affect made possible on the basis of a subject underscored by an ontology of transformation. It is a precondition for the "reciprocal accountability" advocated by Anderson and similarly prioritized by Burke:

without [accountability], there's no clear path for people, especially public figures, to regain the trust of those they've harmed and let down. This is playing out publicly as many of the celebrities and entertainers whose behavior was exposed are now attempting comebacks without having made amends to those they harmed, publicly apologizing, or acknowledging how they're going to change their behavior, industries, or communities to help end sexual violence. (Burke, "On the Rigorous Work")

Accountability is thus a precondition for reparative responsiveness to sexual violence for Burke, just as I have argued it is for Anderson. Whereas carceral justice solutions leave victims with little agency, foregrounding accountability in repair, argue Anderson and Burke, re-inscribes the victim as a complex, dynamic and agential subject. Whilst the reparative insight is that the future can be otherwise, a positive future for victims entails achieving recognition for their harm; this is rarely achieved in carceral responses where justice gets abstracted into sentencing lengths.

Me Too was not conceived as a discourse of outing but rather a strategy of community response and repair, which involved the power of solidarity in reminding individuals that they are not alone (Burke, "Empowerment through Empathy"). In their introduction to *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay write that:

our point of departure is to call into question through the analysis of concrete contexts the basic assumption that vulnerability and resistance are mutually oppositional, even as the opposition is found throughout in mainstream politics as well as prominent strands of feminist theory [...] What follows when we conceive of resistance as drawing from vulnerability as a resource of vulnerability, or as part of the very meaning or action of resistance itself? (1)

This is precisely the insight that Burke pursues when she argues that Me Too, in many ways, is about agency. “It’s not about giving up your agency, it’s about claiming it” (Burke, “You Have to Use Your Privilege”). The movement in its inception was one in which identifying vulnerability was about building a fabric of already-existing resistance. Rather than propose a solution to violence, as if non-violence can be achieved, the task is to negotiate a way of persisting and sustaining liveable lives in the present; and this is precisely the place of accountability.

This essay has discussed how Anderson’s engagement with vulnerability contains a phenomenological and an ethical level and that, taken together, these correspond to an *account* of accountability, premised on an ontology of the transformable subject. Through an exploration of the challenges facing feminist responses to sexual violence, as well as the ambivalent status of the viral #MeToo movement for feminists, I have paved the way for a consideration of the centrality of accountability in responses to sexual violence. The intersectional potential of this is demonstrated in Tarana Burke’s grassroots anti-violence activism. Eschewing essentialism is a key part of an intersectional response which focuses on power relations rather than individuals and refuses to allow cultural-deficit explanations for violence to stand in for an interrogation of patriarchy and white supremacy. Burke’s activism is intersectional and politically promising. What Anderson’s theorization of vulnerability offers in addition is an ethical ground for prioritizing accountability and, in the process, it demonstrates the relevance of Burke’s model of anti-violence organizing across intersectional lines more

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broadly, exposing inadequacies of the viral movement in the process.

conclusion

For Anderson, the meaning of vulnerability cannot be reduced to its negative association with injury. On the contrary, as she demonstrated in both her life and her writing, vulnerability entails openness to transformation and this is both a phenomenological condition and one which can be actively mined in the pursuit of “life-enhancing” ethical relations (“‘Ethical’ Vulnerability” 149). I have argued that in place of the rational, deliberative subject of normative ethics, Anderson poses a vulnerable subject, underscored by an ontology of transformation. This is an ethical subject, one whose emergence in the context of violence – phenomenological vulnerability, our capacity to be affected, underscores the potential for violence – makes possible ethical responsiveness to violence. Echoing Gilson’s postulation that “it is precisely because we are vulnerable [...] that we feel any compulsion to respond ethically” (*Ethics* 11), for Anderson there is a normative account of responsiveness which ensues from the postulation of a common, shared vulnerability. Ethical vulnerability, she argues, entails active engagement with openness to being changed and this has both a self- and an other-regarding dimension. A feminist response to violence entails precisely such an “openness to self- and other-affection [...] to a new future as a dynamic process” (“‘Ethical’ Vulnerability” 147) and such a dynamic, reciprocal process of repair necessitates accountability.

I have argued that the contention that it is as vulnerable beings that we are open to transformation – in both negative and positive directions – has implications for longstanding questions within feminism regarding how to respond in an intersectional feminist manner to instances of sexual violence. When considered in such a context, Anderson’s ethical vulnerability meets the following conditions. It refuses essentialized subject positions such as victim/perpetrator as these are at odds with her dynamic ontology of the subject as always becoming and transforming.

In her prioritization of reciprocity and accountability, ethical vulnerability does not pursue judicial justice, which is both ineffective and far from neutral with regards to its logic of which bodies are deserving of protection. Finally, ethical vulnerability is intersectional in its focus on power relations as the cause of violence, rather than pathology or culture. I ended by exposing the shortcomings of mainstream sexual violence discourses which do not incorporate the insights of Anderson's ethical vulnerability. By contrast, Burke's grassroots, community-centred Me Too movement, I demonstrated, does incorporate many of Anderson's concerns. As such, I proposed that each can speak to the other: Anderson's contribution provides the philosophical grounds by which the political merits of Burke's movement can be fathomed. Reciprocally, Burke's necessarily intersectional and embedded context offers a testing ground for Anderson's reflections and locates Anderson's account of accountability within a rich history of women of colour activism.

Anderson's ethical vulnerability can provide a point of departure for an intersectional feminist engagement with sexual violence politics and whilst it is by no means comprehensive, it addresses some of the key challenges that feminists grappling with this question have faced. Ethical vulnerability entails an ontology of the transforming subject and such an ontology is political in its implications for reparative responses to sexual violence.



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notes

1 Anderson refers to Butler as "a highly significant dialogue partner for my own work on vulnerable life" ("Ethical' Vulnerability" 161).

2 Whilst violence of some degree is inescapable for Butler, being the background condition for subject emergence, Butler's normative politics is

directed towards "ethical proscriptions against the waging of violence" ("Reply" 185). See Gilson (*Ethics*), especially chapter 2, for a thorough discussion of the dual operation of the norm in Butler's thought, as well as its relation to violence.

3 See Lloyd for a discussion of the emergence of corporeal vulnerability in the context of the 9/11 terror attacks and the concept's relation to Butler's earlier thought.

4 Anderson criticizes Utilitarianism ("Ethical' Vulnerability" 150) as well as the "ethics of justice" (148) for their valorization of moral impartiality and moral invulnerability, and the "ethics of care" for non-reciprocal emphasis on the vulnerability of the other ("Justice and Forgiveness" 130).

5 Anderson stresses the relational character of accountability in order to emphasize that accountability is a two-way process between subjects who interact. Anderson posits a relational ontology in which subjects are bound to and thus dependent on one another. As such, both vulnerability and accountability are necessarily relational. This intersubjective character of both conditions is also what belies their ethical character, and Anderson also refers to "relational accountability" as "ethical accountability." This amounts to a challenge to dominant ontologies of individualism, in which victim and perpetrator can be treated as discrete, independent subjects. In addition, by distinguishing relational accountability from asymmetrical vulnerability, Anderson is highlighting the importance of attending to relationships, power dynamics, structures, processes and complexities which are often obscured in narrow or decontextualized interpretations of accountability. (See Moncrieffe for a discussion of relational accountability.)

6 When I use the terminology "victim" or "perpetrator" it is simply to refer to how subjects' role position in an instance of violence or harm has been articulated. These are not intended as identities, and certainly not as discrete, fixed categories. As I employ the terms, one can be a victim or perpetrator of an attack but not more generally; the terms only signify within a specific context. See Beck et al. and Armatta for discussion of the rates of violence in prison.

7 Including South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Palestine. See <<https://MeTooising.withgoogle.com/>> (accessed 4 Dec. 2019); Gill and Orgad. Whilst having a near global reach, the movement

is also culturally specific. See Hasunuma and Shin for a comparison of the impact of the movement in Japan and South Korea.

8 A year after Milano's allegations, Bloomberg reports that "The headlines alone are dizzying. Since the *New York Times* reported allegations of serial predation by movie mogul Harvey Weinstein a year ago, at least 425 prominent people across industries have been publicly accused of sexual misconduct, a broad range of behavior that spans from serial rape to lewd comments and abuse of power." See <<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-me-too-anniversary/>> (accessed 4 Dec. 2019).

9 In this way it is somewhat reflective of a "post-feminist" discourse. McRobbie characterized the 1990s as a period in which "feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant" (255) and, in its mainstream media instantiation at least, sex has become political, but as distinct from feminism.

10 Burke is ambivalent about #MeToo. Whilst she has worked with it and is frequently positive about its ability to reach a large number of people, she also articulates hesitations, particularly with the movement's shift of focus from survivors to high-profile individuals (Burke, "On the Rigorous Work"), as well as its neglect of less privileged groups (Burke, "Our Pain").

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