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## **Intersectional Vulnerabilities and the Banality of Harm: The Dangerous Desires of Women of Color Activists**

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### **Keywords**

intersectionality, harm, women of color, activism, solidarity, emotions, Europe, ambivalence, care

### **Abstract**

In this article we examine how intersectional vulnerabilities are experienced and made sense of by women of colour activists in Europe. We name intersectional vulnerabilities as a broad, sometimes contradictory, set of emotions, all tied to activists' complex experiences of insecurity and community. Intersectional vulnerabilities are those risks and rewards, derived from women of color activists' positioning in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status, which shape the possibilities of women of color's activist labor. These vulnerabilities are Janus-faced, in that they are experienced as social harms that oftentimes lead to community. Our article grapples with the bittersweetness of vulnerability and how the banality of harms meted out to women of color nevertheless contains the seeds of resistance, solidarity and self-love.

### **Introduction**

In our work exploring women of color's activism in Europe, we have noted how activists have expanded their discussions about the successes and obstacles they face in their organizing and mobilizing to explicitly include their emotional landscapes (Hochschild 1979; Wingfield 2010; Berlant 2011; Hemmings 2012; Ahmed 2014; Pedwell 2014; Lewis

and Hemmings 2019). Beyond the usual discussions about fighting white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, xenophobia and homophobia, we see activists explicitly struggling with their own emotions and how those feelings are simultaneously creative and destructive forces in their networks and organizations. Of late, exhaustion, burnout and precarity are the undercurrents that shape activists' understandings of their work and their relations with their comrades (Emejulu and Bassel 2020; Sobande and Emejulu 2021). However, alongside these negative emotions are also positive ones of pleasure, joy and solidarity that activists experience by being in community with others (Lorde 1982; Brown 2019). We identify these broad, sometimes contradictory, set of emotions, all tied to activists' complex experiences of insecurity and community, as 'intersectional vulnerabilities'. These are connected via 'bittersweet affects' which we define as the experiences of joy, kinship, and solidarity tinged with pain, sadness, and the weight of the struggle to survive (Emejulu, forthcoming 2022).

Affects and emotions are entangled in ways reflected by the interchangeable use of such words in society. While we use the terms 'emotions', 'feelings' and 'affects', we regard 'affects' as often having a stronger association with structural dimensions and power dynamics than the terms 'emotions' or 'feelings' which are typically tethered to notions of individualised responses to particular social situations. We also draw on Xine Yao's (2021, 5) work *Disaffected* which elucidates the limitations of when "[e]motional expression is presumed to be the signifier of affective human interiority". Focusing on the experiences of racialized people and reflecting on the work of Rei Terada on the 'expressive hypothesis', Yao (2021, 5) highlights that "[if] they do not accept this condition of affectable vulnerability, they fail to demonstrate their emotions as evidence of their subjectivity and,

therefore, status as human subjects”. Yao (2021) explicates the existence and experiences of forms of affect and disaffect which are far from being connected to types of emotional expression that are often expected, and, even, demanded, from racialized people in white supremacist societies. Hence, although our work refers to emotions, feelings, and affect, we pay particular attention to the term ‘bittersweet affects’ in a way that is shaped by critical studies of how affects connect to and disconnect from emotional expressions.

Informed by Yao’s (2021) discussion of ‘disaffected’ and ‘affectable vulnerability’, we define intersectional vulnerabilities as those risks and rewards, derived from women of color activists’ positioning in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and legal status, which shape the possibilities of women of color’s activist labor. As we will argue, these intersectional vulnerabilities are Janus-faced, in that they are experienced as social harms that oftentimes lead to solidarity and community. The ways in which vulnerabilities are converted into fruitful connections with others is what we call ‘bittersweet affects’ which involve forms of action and feelings that present the possibility of pursuing a ‘better world’ while reckoning with the reality of present-day struggles. Bittersweet affects are found in the sweetness of successful solidarity-building and the contrastingly bitter aftertaste of digesting the prospect that some struggles may outlive us. Accordingly, our article grapples with how intersectional vulnerabilities, and the emotions and bittersweet affects in which they are entangled, are experienced at both the individual and collective levels of the lives of women of color organizing in Europe.

We take a broad understanding of vulnerability, seeing it as risky. Activism is risk-taking labor which we define further below, and which can threaten lives and livelihoods as well as expand activists’ understandings of themselves and deepen their bonds with others.

In this way, vulnerability, and in turn activism, is a kind of dangerous desire for a different world. There are very real costs to women of color's activism, which leave them vulnerable to disappointment, disillusionment and oftentimes, violence. But there are also significant rewards, such as the ability to see their hopes and dreams realized, and to stand in community with comrades, which are seductive and difficult to refuse—these are bittersweet affects. Women of color activists' vulnerabilities are intersectional because of their structural positioning as marginalized actors seeking social change. Women of color's institutionalized precarity—they are more likely to be living in poverty, to be living in insecure housing and to be working in insecure, low paid work—which is derived from their experiences of racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia and homophobia, mean they are, largely, at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Bassel and Emejulu 2017; Emejulu and van der Scheer 2021). Experiencing this kind of systematic exclusion is a foundational vulnerability for activists but being on the margins can also be an opportunity whereby activists use creative methods in their community-building and solidarity work to advance their interests (hooks 1984; Mackay 2021).

In this article, we explore how women of color activists in Europe make sense of and negotiate their intersectional vulnerabilities, particularly how they are impacted by the banality of harms they face. Referring to the 'banality of harm' does not dismiss how harm impacts women of color and should not be mistaken for suggesting that nothing can be done to address harm. Instead, accounting for the ordinary nature of harm is crucial to acknowledging harms that are seldom deemed shocking or more than mere spectacle by academics and policymakers (Bento and Johnson 2021, 14). In this way, recognizing the everydayness of harm moves beyond "spectacles of violence" (Pereira 2018, 252) and

focuses on how the harms women of color face are routinely demanded by the various European societies in which they live. Understanding the banality of harm, and in turn, how harming women of color is expected and welcomed, can be used as a resource for women of color's resistance. Our explicit acknowledgement of the ordinariness of harm meted out to women of colour in Europe, including 'the ordinariness of racism' (Tate 2016, 68), is part of our epistemic commitment to ground our work in the lived realities of women of color.

We begin this article by critically examining ideas of vulnerability, security and desire, particularly in relation to women of color and intersectionality. We then turn to consider the relationship between harm, emotions, ordinariness and the collective body which impacts women of color activists. We will then move on to discuss our methodology and methods. Finally, we will analyze empirical data about women of color activists in London and Amsterdam to understand the risks and rewards of activists' labor and how vulnerability operates as a dangerous desire through which activists build solidarity and community in the face of the banality and brutality of harm. Overall, we contribute to understandings of how intersectional vulnerabilities and bittersweet affects are part of the politics of the everyday, emotions, and care at the core of the lives of women of color organizing in Europe.

### **On vulnerability, security and desire**

Emotions are far from merely being a private matter solely experienced internally by an individual (Ahmed 2004; Lorde 1982). Rather, emotions are socio-political in nature and can be encountered, communicated, and chronicled collectively. Emotions animate and are embodied in ways that are both felt by and transcend bodies and minds. Vulnerability, as an emotion, functions in this way too. Typically associated with exposure to emotional and

physical harms, vulnerability is a concept that tends to connote danger, risk and insecurity. However, these hegemonic understandings of vulnerability rarely acknowledge the possibility for forms of vulnerability, in certain contexts, to be creative and beneficial to the person experiencing this feeling. Thinking about how vulnerability functions in the lives of women of color activists can help us, as Lauren Berlant (2011, 7) argues, develop “ways to attend to the sensual registers of mass crisis as they impact the historical sense of the present”. Vulnerability is a much more complex state of being that is not necessarily a destructive emotion at odds with people’s wellbeing. Rather, we argue that vulnerability can play a generative role in the trust and relationship-building that is essential to activism.

When reflecting on their experiences as women of color in academia, Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi (2009, 91) share the following explanation of self-disclosure and vulnerability which we find very helpful to our understandings of women of colour’s activism:

Self-disclosure and vulnerability are often mutually inclusive. Self-disclosure often opens somebody up for scrutiny and renders one vulnerable. Vulnerability is the feeling of being opened up for scrutiny not only by students but also by whomever is around us, and it comes with its own fear and anxieties.

Self-exposure is critical to self-knowledge and intimate and trusting relations with others. By articulating one’s dreams and desires, one moves out of the bounds of security and into risk, vulnerability and hurt—but also, perhaps, mutual recognition and understanding. Thus, vulnerability can be a sensuous, desirous emotion that is not the antonym of security

but an emotion that transforms the very idea of security into something more risky but also worthwhile. Vulnerability can be an emotional process of being true to oneself and in turn, reaching out to others who see and value this true self (or at least this self that is true in that particular moment). Vulnerability is a desire to connect with others, despite the risk of rejection and humiliation, to attain a different state of security. Security on these terms means self-exposure and embracing the possibilities of harm to build meaningful connections with like-minded others. Feminist theories of affect emphasize these ontological questions of self and other, and how “deeply felt needs, feelings and emotions” politicize, radicalize and motivate feminists to action (Stanley and Wise 1993, 66).

Vulnerability and security are imbricated in a desirous politics of connection to others on trustworthy and risky terms. Thinking about vulnerability in this way creates a different way to approach women of color’s activist labor. By ‘activist labor’ we mean the work and care activists expend in attempting to achieve their goals. It is important to understand the activities that activists undertake as *labor*—psychic, emotional, caring and manual—to maintain their organizations and networks, to sustain solidarity and social relations, to withstand attacks from opponents and to persuade broader publics (Tronto 2015; Nuamah 2020). In doing this labor, activists consent—perhaps unconsciously at first—to vulnerability. By committing themselves to the unsexy and often frustrating labor of activism, activists open themselves up to new possibilities of becoming—new ontological formations—which are oftentimes an unexpected reward of vulnerability. This dynamic between self-disclosure, vulnerability, and collective dreams and anxieties is how solidarity, as a structure of feeling, is constructed between activists. Vulnerability,



understood in this way, is a different path to security—a collective security for all collectively laboring for new futures.

However, the desirous politics of vulnerability must be understood in intersectional terms. It is not an accident that women of color self-organize, often by themselves, for their interests—and their security. Structurally positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy by virtue of their race, class, gender, sexuality, disability and/or legal status, women of color are prompted to think differently about vulnerability and security because of the harms they encounter in society and, importantly, in supposedly radical and revolutionary white-dominated activist spaces (Emejulu and Bassel 2020; Sobande and Emejulu 2021). We insist on a framework of intersectional vulnerabilities to capture the harms that women of color encounter in their activism and everyday life due to intersecting inequalities (Bassel and Emejulu 2017). However, these harms are also possibilities. By joining together to articulate, define and counteract these collective harms, this can prompt the generation of shared vulnerabilities in terms of security and affinity with like-minded others. In this way, women of color activists, transpose and defray the costs of structural harms through self-organization and liberatory work. These are bittersweet affects at work.

Nevertheless, ambivalence is always linked to intersectional vulnerabilities because, whilst harms and insecurity can be understood and opposed individually and collectively, they are still ontological, epistemic and emotional violences that cannot be ignored or avoided (Emejulu, forthcoming 2022). Indeed Yao (2021, 3) argues that the kinds of ambivalences we have identified are part of “the ongoing racial and sexual politics of unfeeling not as oppression from above but as a tactic from below...[W]ithhold from those colonial intimacies. Refuse to feel according to the hierarchies of the biopolitics of feeling.

Be disaffected” (Yao 2021, 2). Intersectional vulnerabilities represent a tension in that harms must be endured and survived, somehow, but this survival is made possible in community and in solidarity with others. As Claire Hemmings (2012, 148) argues, this kind of “affective solidarity” is built and maintained through “the importance of feeling for others as a way of transforming ourselves and the world”. One would wish not to experience harm at all, but, of course, it is a necessary condition for articulating grievances, developing strategies and tactics and taking collective action. The risk of harm produces the security of community and as such, community will be built on a foundation of bittersweet affects. Ambivalence is what holds together the two sides of vulnerability and makes the desire for a new and better world an always fraught vision. We will return to ambivalence and bittersweet affects later in the discussion of our empirical findings.

We now turn to examine the ordinariness of vulnerability and how the banality of harm shapes women of color’s activism.

### **On the banality of harm and the politics of care**

At the core of our article is an awareness of how the politics of the everyday includes the ordinariness of harm. Recognizing its banality is central to an expansive understanding of harm which refuses to reinforce narratives of harm shrouded in spectacle which rest on the assumption that harm is an anomaly, not a norm. Our articulation of the everydayness of harm is informed by the vital research and writing of Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson (2021, 14) which includes rousing reflections on the work of “unveiling the violence and microaggressions of the everyday. We do this to situate the urgency to demand and build new world-makings”. We also approach our work in a way guided by the words of Shirley Anne Tate (2016, 86) on “dirty affects”, such as how “Racism is indeed so ordinary as to be

transmitted through the flinching away from Black touch, whether as theory or body contact, a movement away which, even if slight, contains within it a moment of contempt/disgust”.

Ultimately, embracing an understanding of the banality of harm is necessary to grasp the nuances of how harm is enacted and experienced in daily life in ordinary, physical, emotional, and epistemic ways. Our focus on the banality of harm affirms Charmaine Pereira’s (2018, 256) perspective which asserts that “it is critical to recognize the politics of visibility and nonvisibility in the dynamics set in force by a focus on the spectacular”. Consequently, we too attempt to explore “what lies hidden” (Pereira 2018, 256) because it is typically perceived as existing outside of the realms of spectacle deemed worthy of attention. The relatively “hidden” experiences we reflect on in our article are those of intersectional vulnerabilities that animate the organizing of women of color activists in Europe, where institutionally upheld “postrace sensibilities present us with slippages where ‘race’ no longer matters, racism does not exist” (Tate 2016, 68).

Our understanding of harm as being far from unusual, and in some cases, unavoidable, is also informed by work on emotions, the everyday, and care. Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 117) account of “affective economics” offers insights concerning such matters and includes the poignant question “how do emotions move between bodies?”. Drawing on this question, we consider how emotions and their relationship to the banality of harm move between the individual *and* collective bodies of women of color activists and how this deepens our conceptualization of intersectional vulnerabilities. Anchoring our work in an understanding of the banality of harm, including “the ordinariness of racism” (Tate 2016, 68), is generatively potent given its potential to push against state-sanctioned claims that

institutional racism does not exist. Specifically, we are penning this article at a point in time when the political suppression of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and anti-racism continues to be rife in Europe and North America, and thus there remains an urgent need to refute rhetoric that represents experiences of racism as the exception rather than the ongoing, everyday colonial politics of Europe.

Buoyed by prior work on affect, emotions, activism, and “thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis” (Berlant 2011, 8), we turn our attention to how emotion work and practices of care scaffold the collective organizing of women of color facing crises in Europe. By naming the ordinariness of harm that they face, we recognize both structural and interpersonal dimensions of harm that are often obscured when harm is regarded as an abnormality in society rather than being built into its foundations.

We echo Berlant’s (2011, 10) explanation of “the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine”. In the context of the activist experiences of women of color in Europe, the ordinary includes everyday liberationist and survival strategies which involve iterations of individual *and* collective emotion work. Put differently, the daily work of women of color activists can involve tending to one another and the world, buttressed by an intention to address intersectional vulnerabilities while imagining and enacting futures that feel otherwise to the current catastrophic status quo. Although the emotion and care work that fortifies this is not always apparent, or acknowledged by those outside of these activist spaces (Bryan et al. 2018; Johnson 2020), it is palpably ever-present and captured by the words of women of color organizing in Europe.

Arguably, “[t]he means by which emotions flow or are blocked take us back to fundamental social and political questions about how spaces are organised around certain bodies” (Ahmed 2014, 225). We regard the collectives of women of color activists as constituting a body (of work, will, and wisdom) that consists of many parts (people, places, and political action). Accounting for distinct differences and shared commitments that can be at the core of such collective action, we attempt to tease out how emotion work and practices of care are experienced and embodied by the individual bodies of women of color activists, and the collective body that their work co-creates.

Hence, we depart from a focus on “how spaces are organised around certain bodies” (Ahmed 2014, 225). Instead, we consider related questions regarding how intersectional vulnerabilities and associated emotion work faced by women of color activists is experienced and embodied in individual and collective ways which both complicate and contribute to solidarity-building across differences. In doing so, we acknowledge that collective practices of care can include addressing intra-communal experiences of harm, while also working together to tackle forms of structural oppression that result in harms inflicted on women of color. Inspired by anti-racist scholarship by Beth Kamunge, Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Azeezat Johnson (2018, 1), our article includes reflections on how the past, present, and possibilities of the future collide and are made manifest in the emotion work and practices of care of women of color in Europe.

We will now turn to discuss our methodology and methods.

## **Methods: From catastrophes to vulnerabilities**

This article is based on the empirical findings of Emejulu's project, *The Politics of Catastrophe*. This project explored how the three-prong catastrophes of austerity measures, the migration crisis and the rise of the far right, influence women of color's activism in three countries: The Netherlands (Amsterdam), the United Kingdom (London) and the United States (Austin). Data collection took place from November 2017 to December 2018 across all three research sites. For the purposes of this article, we will be focusing only on the data from London and Amsterdam. Emejulu selected each of these cities because of their long histories of women of color activism and the diverse networks of women of color activists struggling for social, economic and political rights. We define 'women of color activists' as racialized cis and trans women and non-binary femmes organising for equality and justice. The research team—Emejulu, working with two research assistants—completed case studies in each city which combined several different methods to triangulate the data and compare across national contexts. Through semi-structured one to one interviews and focus groups with activists, participant observation of campaign meetings and protests and an analysis of activists' social media data—Twitter, Facebook and Instagram—the research team examined how women of color understand their activism, how they organize and mobilize and how they make sense of their successes and failures. Working with two research assistants, Emejulu and her research assistants interviewed 53 participants and observed 22 activist meetings and demonstrations. The research team spoke with activists working on a range of issues from abolition feminism, to anti-borders work, to mutual aid. All identifying aspects of participants, their networks and campaigns have been removed. We will now turn to examine the empirical findings of our project in relation to intersectional vulnerabilities.

## **Bittersweet vulnerabilities**

In terms of mapping intersectional vulnerabilities amongst women of color activists, the first thing that struck us was how activists' positive affirmations about themselves, their work and their communities, were always tinged by sadness and regret. Indeed, as we have argued, envisioning and prefiguring the new world produced by desirous activism is always ambivalent, because those ideas about a different kind of future are always deeply informed by real and on-going harms in the present. For instance, this Surinamese Dutch feminist activist in Amsterdam talks about working between the emotions of love and discomfort to support the activism and everyday survival of the undocumented migrant women with whom she works:

Yes, I have learned about myself that it is very important to do things from a love ethic. A sincere ethic of love and, also from there, as a result, that you are truly dedicated. And that it is not something that...you just do on the side. But what I've also learned, which I find very important, is that I am in a privileged position. I am Black, I live in the Netherlands but I am still privileged compared to these [undocumented] women. Because I can move freely here, I know almost all channels, I understand how social life works here, so I know how to find my way. And then at a certain point, I thought yes, that is an unequal position. Well, I can't blame myself for that, but I can do something to make it less dissimilar... [This is] an opportunity to actually create those feelings of discomfort. I think it is very important to make [my activism] uncomfortable.

The labor this activist undertakes is informed by seemingly contradictory emotions generated by the stark differences in language and legal status between her, as a Black Dutch citizen, and her undocumented comrades. Whilst she believes her activism is based in love and dedication to supporting migrants' rights, the reality is that there are very real and unequal power relations between the activists in her circle that can never be reconciled and this renders her activism both ambivalent and uncomfortable. Here we see clearly how bittersweet vulnerabilities are produced through women of color's activism. Love must always wrestle with and be embraced by discomfort in recognition of the structural inequalities that shape social relations even in supposedly radical spaces built by and for women of color.

This Surinamese-Dutch anti-racist activist is even more explicit in terms of the dual nature of vulnerability—how experiences of harm also generate new possibilities for Black self-love. Self-love is learned in the context of and in reaction to the structural harms that debase, devalue and disrespect Black life in the Netherlands:

Externally, we have to break down the system and break down institutional racism. Internally, we have to love ourselves. Especially us who have been told for centuries that we have to hate ourselves. We have to love ourselves because if you don't love yourself, we can't love each other. So loving ourselves and loving each other is so connective in community building...I hope in the future we can learn to love ourselves.



Such comments on the relationship between institutional racism and self-love highlight the role of individuals' emotions, vulnerability and interiority in the activism of women of color. These sentiments reflect how "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies" (Ahmed 2004, 117). In other words, the health of the collective's body (the potential impact and longevity of women of color's activism in Europe) is shaped by both individuals' psychic and emotional currents shaping the relationships between activists. Anticipation and experience of everyday forms of harm (including with activists' familial relations) contribute to so-called "Love-Politics" (Nash 2011) and collective forms of care, including the efforts of women of color in Europe who forge alternative relationships and view interconnected forms of self and collective love and care as being central to their activist labor of breaking down institutional racism.

Intersectional vulnerabilities catalyse activism by building connections between women of color across time and space—bringing the past into the present to change the future through memory work that can only happen through the articulation and understanding of how intersectional vulnerabilities shape such women's lives and the possibilities for their activism. As this Surinamese Dutch feminist activist in Amsterdam argues:

Well, I think what's important to me as a woman of color is that I connect with other women of color. And if we are indeed talking about intersectionality, I have to say very honestly that [my] focus is on Black women and women of color because I still think these are the largest marginalized groups. When I look at the history of what

these women have done, they definitely deserve something [better]. So I also fight for the recognition for that, and also to show younger generations like “you come from a legacy of women who have really struggled for justice, for better distribution of resources”. And I see it happening all over the world again, that it’s Black women and women of color who stand up, who are in solidarity... And like a phoenix they have to resurrect themselves. And they have chosen to take love with that resurrection. And I believe that that is very deeply embedded in our DNA, that love for each other, for society.

Facing up to the structural harms arrayed against Black women and other women of color makes community possible and sets the stage for intergenerational dialogues in which younger women can learn from and be inspired by the struggles and resistances of their foremothers so that love for self and other women of color, is at the centre of these activists’ labor.

We see similar sentiments at play across the English Channel where this Black British anti-austerity activist in London argues for caring politics that are informed directly by intersectional vulnerabilities that women of color experience. These caring politics—tending to oneself and for the dispossessed and despised, who are most likely to be women of color—are the expression of solidarity and the struggle to maintain one’s humanity despite the social harms women of color experience:

What we have in common as women is unwaged work. I think those basics, and the fact that our poverty, racism and sexism are directly connected... I mean, it’s not, it’s

not at all easy, but in a way we have to do it because otherwise we end up scabbing on [betraying] each other. Or we're making demands that undermine other people, or we're making deals, or we're taking money that doesn't belong to us, it belongs to other people. And all those things are completely destructive of transforming society in the way we want...What we've been saying all along is that we have to care enough to organise and to campaign in a way that is principled. That is not even seen as caring work. But that's what we have to do, you know, we're swimming against the tide that has trained us to do exactly the opposite from birth more or less.

Caring about others is recognizing the intersectional vulnerabilities that women of color experience and resisting the temptation to exploit these harms for personal gain. Caring politics are bittersweet too because they see the variety and banality of the social harms experienced by women of color and insists on solidarity and community to build a new world free of these threats.

Similarly, this British Asian abolitionist feminist in London understands her activist labor as radical care work, for the survival of women of color in the context of intersectional vulnerabilities:

So, nothing that we're doing is, like, a radical political statement, [rather] it's kind of community care. Like, ways in which we're caring for each other in a way that's radical. And, for me, I think that's what is central to basically how I frame all of my politics is I know the things I do are because I have this sense of having care for the

people around me, and I know I'm conditioned in a particular way because I am a woman of color. Like, that we, we instinctively have to have this care because we are the ones that are relied upon to look after so many people at once, right. But it's like my starting point isn't, like, you know, I haven't read all the theory, I wasn't...studying Marxism or whatever, but it was, I have a compulsion, a need, it's like a weird, total mothering sense of wanting to protect people, right. But then how does that feed into sharing radical politics and looking after each other, and making sure that we can continue to undo the power of state institutions? It's like this idea of care has become so central to everything in terms of how I organize...We know that those things that we're struggling against are not realistically gonna end in our lifetime, so how do we make sure that people can survive?

It is radical to care about those who are despised and dismissed by society. Looking to mother those for whom care and protection are not typically offered is to fully embrace vulnerability by stepping into an intimate relationship of looking after each other. Whilst this might not transform the world, it does have real, immediate, material and emotional effects in which we can clearly see the dual nature of vulnerability play out in ways that transform and give comfort to activists facing everyday harms.

Recognizing and valuing vulnerability creates the possibility for community and connection. For this British Asian anti-austerity activist, she argues that making connections is itself a radical act of choosing community in the midst of harm and suffering. Actively choosing to be with like-minded others is a form of resistance to the intersectional

vulnerabilities women of color experience. And, of course, it is those very same vulnerabilities that make community possible:

It's like having those safe spaces and...all of that is part of our activism I think because it's, it's, you know, that bonding, you know, it's part of what they don't want. Do you know what I mean? Like to have these connections with people and to be joining together in a struggle, the bigger your movement is, the stronger it is. So the fact that we had time to do that and we created it in this space that we had been working towards for such a long time...We were all just like so happy and so loving and stuff. And when you've got race and class and all of these other dynamics going on, even if you do take gender out of it [because this group only organizes with cis and trans women]...we still have these struggles...Like I don't see how you can be not political in some way when all of this stuff is going on around you because the more I learn, the more I'm like, it's us [women of color] that's like suffering the most. And it's people who like come from my communities that are the most at risk...Like whether it's abuse, whether it's mental health support needs, whether it's addiction, whether it's drug use, whether, all of these things. Like we are more vulnerable and therefore I think like, you know, we have a better understanding of these things and it means more to us.

For these women of color activists, intersectional vulnerabilities function as a structure of feeling—solidarity—which binds them together and animates their activism. As this Black British anti-austerity activist observes, her activism is informed by direct experience of

social harms and inequalities, and it is on that basis that she reaches out to others. Her activism is self-interest grounded in concern for the collective:

The basis of solidarity for me is the idea that we are in this struggle together...I do it because, like...we're helping each other out, we're fighting together, the same fight. It's not charity. Like, it's not empathy, it's not pity, it's just cause we're in this together. The stakes are the same [for all of us].

Intersectional vulnerabilities and the bittersweet affects that are inherent to them are a way to collectively imagine a different world. One in which people of color feel secure, feel joy and pleasure and narrate their own lives in ways that affirm and value themselves. As this British Asian abolition feminist tells it, these vulnerabilities are how activists bind themselves to each other and also strategize for another kind of life, away from the immediate material, emotional and discursive harms of Europe, a life in which they are able to freely and fully express themselves, and to determine their own fates:

But a lot of the people of colour that I'm speaking to, they just wanna create safe spaces for other people of colour and that is their activism, it's the community aspect...What is it in the immediacy of just like *right now* what can we create because not everyone is thinking about this world that we're gonna create for our great grandchildren or whatever. They're just seeing their mum struggle ... It comes back down to we are more concerned about survival than like this longer term like idealised, I dunno, communist, socialist, whatever, society.

Intersectional vulnerabilities spark activism for survival but also the desirous politics of joy, pleasure and self-determination in community with others.

### **Conclusions: Vulnerability is a “doing” word**

Intersectional vulnerabilities involve processes of self-disclosure, emotional exposure, and collective caring that can constitute “bittersweet affects” and form the core of the activism of women of color in Europe. Moving away from notions of stoicism, fearlessness, and strength that are often projected onto women of color—and Black women in particular—and their organizing, our article articulates some of the intricacies of individual and collective introspection and expression that make the organizing of women of color possible, and which make visible the everydayness of both vulnerability and experiences of harm. We reject the idea that vulnerabilities and security are always diametrically opposed. Without embracing and expressing elements of vulnerability, the space for solidarity and collective work rapidly shrinks. For these reasons, and in conversation with work on affect, emotions, embodiment and activism, we regard intersectional vulnerabilities as being, at once, sustenance that sustains the work of women of color organizers, and a source of obstacles to be collectively addressed. In essence, such vulnerabilities result in affects that are “bittersweet”.

Our earlier musings on vulnerability, security, desire, emotions, ordinariness, and the collective body emphasized the ways that the interior feelings of an individual are always (consciously or otherwise) in dialogue with those of other people. Emotions move within, between, and across people in ways that are paramount to the work of women of

color activists in Europe. Our article, and the experiences that it foregrounds, illustrates that the messiness of emotions and intersectional vulnerabilities in which they are enmeshed is not something to be reconciled by women of color activists. Rather, intersectional vulnerabilities can be confronted and responded to with care, without seeking to command or confine them in ways that could undermine their capacity to contribute to change.

Future work may expand on ours by examining how both fragility and stability can function in relation to the experiences of intersectional vulnerabilities and emotions discussed in our article. Discourses and ideas of fragility are so often rooted in whiteness and, particularly, white womanhood, including “the implicit statement: we know—indeed, have always known—that white feelings produce and maintain structures of domination” (Yao 2021, 2). Further work that tends to fragility from the perspective of women of color activists in Europe has much potential to yield insights about the fluidity of fragility, its fraught connection to intersectional vulnerabilities, and how fragility can form part of the foundations of collectiveness. That said, we remain conscious of the potential for the emotional experiences of women of color to be fetishized in ways that are at odds with their liberationist goals, so we do not simply call for more work on these matters. Instead, we call for continued work that tends to this subject with the sensitivity, solidarity, and self-reflection that it requires. We also affirm the words of Azeezat Johnson (2018, 802) who articulates how, at times, “Intersectionality can be used as a stand-in for ‘difference’ or ‘diversity’ without addressing the logics of white supremacy”. Accounting for this observation, it is vital that ongoing work on intersectional vulnerabilities does not dilute or



distort what intersectionality means or reduce it to the language of “difference” or “diversity” that Johnson (2018) rightly critiques.

Just as emotions move between and animate women of color and the collective body that they are part of, they can dance from the pages of papers to parts of the people who encounter them. Thus, while the contribution our work makes includes our theorizing of intersectional vulnerabilities, bittersweet affects, and the tensions inherent to them, we hope that what people who engage with our article also find within it, are moments of intimacy and vulnerability that may spark and stir self-reflections or aid ongoing transformative actions of their own.

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