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# Vulnerability and its politics: Precarity and the woundedness of power

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt to unwrite our current disciplinary enamourment with power. We begin from life's woundedness, which we argue engenders a limit condition that both precedes power (vulnerability is the origin of power) and exceeds power (no power can ever resolve the problem of woundedness). To illustrate this, we introduce the 'politics of the wound': a perspective on politics that begins, not from a pre-existing ontology of forces and relations, but from the condition of striving, in infinitely generous and yet fragile ways, to claim sovereignty against the incurable wound of being a living being.

## Keywords

non-relational, non-representational theory, ontology, politics of wound, power, precarity, vulnerability, woundedness

## 1 Introduction

It has been almost 30 years since the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno ([1992] 2004) argued in his seminal work, *Grammar of the Multitude*, that one of the most potent but unremarked upon features of late capitalism is its capacity to engender a pervasive sense of global insecurity. By criticising the way in which an entire tradition of Western philosophy, from Immanuel Kant to Martin Heidegger, mobilised the distinction between fear (which is conditional) and anguish (which is existential and pervasive), Virno argues that post-Fordism has created a context where the two have become irredeemably bound together. It is our current condition, Virno argues, to continuously dwell in an uncanny sense of disorientation, to the extent that the specific dreads and fears of material

insecurity have become constantly experienced (at an increasingly planetary level) against a pervasive backdrop of undefinable anguish of capitalist vulnerability. For Virno, subjects feel perpetually insecure because their lives are interminably held out to a globalised economy that is utterly unmediated and that owes them nothing. As Isabel Lorey (2015) puts it, in a nod to Benjamin, *precaritisation* is no more an exception, but a rule. Since then a number of social and political theorists have taken up this idea in different ways. From Harvey's (2005)

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argument that precarity is the cornerstone of flexible production, to Standing's (2011) work on the creation of a new precarious class (the precariat), or to Butler's (2006) work on violence and precarious lives, the study of precarity, precariat and precarisation has been high on the discipline's conceptual and empirical agenda (e.g. Harker, 2012; Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Joronen and Griffiths, 2019a; Lewis et al., 2015; Strauss, 2018).

Without question, this has been a welcome addition to the field and our own work (see Joronen, 2016, 2017, 2019; Rose, 2014) has benefitted from these debates. But we also recognise a difference. While the work on precarity currently circulating in the discipline shares many similarities with our own interests, there is an enduring inclination in this literature to approach precarity first and foremost as a political, social, racial, spatial and/or gender problem, rather than a profound existential condition definitive for all living beings. Many of the analyses certainly do recognise the difference between *precarity* (as a political/social/spatial predicament) and *precariousness/vulnerability* (as an existential condition) (Butler, 2010), but when one looks at the trajectory of these works, one quickly realises the distinction is mostly made to sequester the latter to focus on the former (see Brice, 2020; Hammami, 2016; Hitchen, 2016; Michel, 2016; Neilson and Rositer, 2008; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2019). Whether done with a post-structuralist, Marxist, postcolonial, 'affective', queer, feminist or non-representational twist, work on precarity consistently emphasises how precarity is used and induced as a political, spatial and/or governmental force/capacity (a means to control, resist, marginalise, exclude etc.) rather than on carefully thinking through the ontological implications of existential precariousness (the implications of our fundamental vulnerability and exposure to the wounding and care of others). Our point here is not to downplay the importance of these works;

we do not dispute that there are politically driven processes of inducing and/or mitigating precariousities and we have no interest in minimising the violent or hopeful effects such a politics can engender (indeed, we have written about these extensively). However, we are concerned about the speed with which the existential dimension is rendered irrelevant; as if the existential is too philosophical, too 'meta', to be imminent to the problem of power and politicisation, thus bearing no essential role in the everyday politics of precarisation. At one level, we recognise that this sequestration is understandable since precarity only appears as a tangible problem when it becomes distilled into specific political relations. As Judith Butler (2015) aptly puts it, when 'articulated in its specificity' and so made 'indissociable from the dimension of politics', precariousness simply 'ceases to be existential' (p. 119). However, in choosing to bracket the problem, our concern is that the existential dimension comes to be framed as something separate, distinctive or irrelevant from concrete questions of politics and power.

Our aim in this article is twofold. On the one hand, we wish to illuminate what we see as the problem – even the danger – of not acknowledging the existential dimension of precariousness and, hence, of not properly understanding the depth of what it means that all affecting and acting, governing and living, remains (and always remains) fundamentally *vulnerable*. In not acknowledging our incapacity to get rid of vulnerability – by not tarrying with it as a condition of all living – we risk misunderstanding not simply the nature of vulnerability but the nature of its potential to be mobilised through various modalities of power. Our first aim, then, is to illustrate how our vulnerability operates as a condition that precedes and exceeds the various capacities and formations of power that attempt to mitigate, exploit or manipulate the realities vulnerability situates. In doing so, we hope to avoid the danger of becoming overly

enamoured with precarity as a power technique, and thus, approaching power as a manipulative force of, rather than respondent to, the condition of being vulnerable. In revealing how power is quintessentially embedded in the existential woundedness of living, we come to see power not as a system of relations – whether understood as social, historical, affective, corporeal, epistemological, discursive and so on – but as a *response* to (what we will term) a wound of living. This leads to our second aim: namely, to illustrate how a proper elaboration of power and existential vulnerability fundamentally alters our conception of what politics is and how politics works. Power in our framing has no ontological status in and of itself – neither as a force nor as a relation – but is something that emerges from the condition of being vulnerable. This alters how we approach politics, or what we call the ‘politics of wound’. For us, politics is a response to the vulnerability imminent to being a living being. Our second aim is to illustrate more fully the implications of not properly seeing the existential woundedness that precedes any and every conception of power and politics.<sup>1</sup>

Taken together, we would suggest that the central task of this article is to illuminate how existential vulnerability – what we will come to call the woundedness of living – situates what we understand to be the central problem of power; a problem that (once understood properly) has the potential to fundamentally reorganise what we understand power to be and how we understand power to work. This problem can be stated thus: *there is no power that precedes or exceeds the condition of existential vulnerability*. To say that no power *precedes* vulnerability, we mean to say that there is no power without or before vulnerability. To live is to be vulnerable, and all uses and forms of power need to respond to this condition. Woundedness is, in this regard, the *origin* of power. This leads to the second term: to say that no power *exceeds* vulnerability, we mean that there is no power

that can resolve the problem that vulnerability poses. There are no actions, events, capacities, decisions or modes of willing that can make the wound of living go away; nothing that can make life impervious to its own vulnerability. Life’s vulnerability exceeds all such gestures. To understand the relation between power and vulnerability in such terms is to understand power not as a relation, a will, a desire or even as a force but first and foremost as a problem. Power is, by definition, a problem of vulnerability. Thus, while this article is about rethinking politics and power against the problem of woundedness, it is above all about understanding vulnerability as power’s problem (Rose, 2007; Joronen, 2019). It is about understanding that power is a problem of vulnerability. And it is about understanding vulnerability as a *limit* that no power can ever resolve or exceed, but which it nevertheless needs to respond to.

The argument is divided into three further sections. In the second section, we review some of the main avenues that constitute the current literature on vulnerability, precarity, precariousness and other cognate concepts. To be clear, our aim here is not to review the totality of the field but to show how our conception of vulnerability grows from a wide-spread trend in the existing literature to either ignore existential vulnerability altogether or acknowledge it and then quickly bracket it in favour of vulnerability as a political practice, force or affect. The third section develops a critique of this literature on two grounds: first, through the tendency to ontologise power and second, through the inclination to see vulnerability as something produced and manufactured. Drawing upon Butler and others, we argue that the condition of being wounded is one of being prone to vulnerability in a manner that no power can surmount or resolve. Vulnerability, in this rendering, is not something that can be manufactured or produced but on the contrary is precisely what undermines and disables all such efforts. Vulnerability, we argue, is the condition of being

wounded. By this we mean to illuminate a hurt at the heart of living; a tear or laceration that is always open, always prone to being infected that is part and parcel of our bodies, that is a permanent part of *all* living. While this wound can be shielded, tended and/or otherwise protected (by ourselves and others), it cannot be healed. It does not go away. On the contrary, existential vulnerability marks a wound that is always there, something we live with, even as it exposes the utter fragility of living. The final section (4) develops our conception of woundedness through a particular perspective on politics. Specifically, it asks: what does it mean to live with a wound? What are the implications for thinking through questions of power, capacity and change when we understand all living beings as in need of care, as beings who are always held out to a question of living and whether this question will be exploited or cared for? Understanding the ‘politics of wound’ means understanding all politics as essentially a *response* to the problem of existential vulnerability – and a feeble one at that.

## II Precarity, Power, Politics

As previously suggested, we begin by reviewing some of the central bodies of literature currently conceptualising precarity, vulnerability and other related concepts in geography and cognate disciplines. To summarise this expansive literature, we have divided it into four broad branches: the regulation branch, the governing branch, the social relations branch and the affect branch. We recognise the dangers of being overly reductive in such a wide-ranging review and acknowledge the many important overlaps and similarities between the branches. But while there is obviously more diversity in this work than we can give justice to, the review serves a limited purpose, that is, to illustrate the tendency to approach precarity as a political, rather than existential condition.

The *regulation branch* is possibly the first in the discipline to conceptualise precarity as a distinctive historical type of power and thus represents perhaps the most established arena where theories of precarity and precarisation (the creation of precarity) have been developed. The central emphasis of this literature is on global regimes of capital accumulation, particularly on how they have worked to engender structural precarities through the active development of worker insecurity, for example, zero-hour contracts, poor working conditions, lack of future prospects, loss of social and political welfare networks and forced migratory labour (Lewis et al., 2015; Molé, 2010; Strauss, 2018; Strauss and McGrath, 2017; Tyner, 2016). For authors like Guy Standing (2011) and David Harvey (2012), insecurity is the means by which contemporary modes of capital accumulation promote social regulation. Thus, precarity is conceptualised as a tool for, as well as a product of, uneven development and class inequality. There are no doubt numerous topics that fall within this broad description, for example, the work on contemporary housing provisions, economic migrants, exploitative wage relations and the subsuming realities of neoliberal universities (see Berg et al, 2016; Springer, 2010; Waite, 2009). Here precarity is not simply an unintended outcome of current modes of production but the very means by which such economies function. Some literatures connect this functioning to the activities of specific global and national elites (see Ong, 2007; Springer, 2009), while elsewhere it is seen as a feature of global networks of capital, and thus often outside the jurisdiction and/or control of any particular actor, body or a state (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Harvey, 2005). In either case, this work conceptualises precarity as a central feature of our increasingly globalised and networked capitalist condition (cf. Neilson and Rossiter, 2008).

Although the *governance branch* of the precarity literature is in some ways parallel to the

regulation branch, its emphases and concerns are quite distinctive. In the broadest sense, this literature approaches precarity and precarisation as a modality of governing, though we can identify two distinct approaches within this general characterisation. The first approach draws heavily on Foucault, especially his later lectures on neoliberalism, biopolitics and governmentality (see Elden, 2016; Foucault, 2008; Legg, 2016; Oksala, 2013), to explore how self-interest and self-reliance operate as a key mechanism in developing a neoliberal 'art of governing'. By framing subjects as economically autonomous – that is, as skilled and resilient atoms who need to endlessly adapt, compete, requalify and reskill – they are positioned as key players in facilitating neoliberal policies (e.g. Povinelli, 2011). By improving oneself, by framing oneself and one's skills as 'competitive' and by making oneself resilient in the face of vulnerable, unstable and increasingly insecure conditions, subjects not only come to internalise neoliberal precarisation but are actively encouraged, even forced through the demolition of political and economic networks of support, to rely on their own self-reliance and improvement (Lorey, 2015). It is here that subjugation and empowerment become a joint 'art of governing': a system where neoliberal precarisation goes hand-in-hand with the constitution of a subject who remains autonomous and self-reliant precisely due to unremittingly vulnerable conditions outside the subject's control – for example, changing global labour markets, competitive down-sizing, increasing risks of illness, poverty, unemployment, homelessness and so on. As Berlant (2011), and many others since then have argued, neoliberalisation operates via 'cruel optimism': a hopeful narrative of improvement that paradoxically makes subjects more dependent, more vulnerable and more directly beholden to the unaccountable promises of global capitalist competition.

The second approach focuses on a broader set of techniques that states and state agencies use to marginalise, control and/or exclude

vulnerable communities. Auyero (2012), for instance, describes the prevalent role of bureaucratic slowness in maintaining the precarious conditions among shanty town dwellers in contemporary Buenos Aires, while Berda (2017) and Joronen (2017) illustrate how the 'effective inefficiency' of bureaucratic processes operates to maintain and install severe precarities among Palestinian communities under Israeli occupation. Taken together, this work explores the expansion of political techniques designed to foster precarity, disorder and confusion to better control certain sectors of society. Unsurprisingly, such techniques often draw upon legacies of racism, cultural exclusion and settler colonial violence (e.g. Ettliger, 2007; Gazit, 2015; Joronen, 2019; Michel, 2016). In addition, while much of this work focuses on the global south, geographers reveal similar modes of precarisation at work in the US and European Union, for instance, in regard to race or current immigration policies (e.g. Davies and Isakjee, 2019; Lewis et al., 2015; Martin, 2015; Pulido, 2016; Repo, 2016; Waite & Lewis, 2017). What distinguishes this approach to precarity from the one above is a clear shift in focus from economic precarisation (which is endemic to neoliberal subjectification) to forms of governing that operate on diverse sectors and use various levers of state to keep the lives of certain groups fragile, precarious and uncertain (see also Ramadan and Fregonese, 2017; Rose, 2014).

This brings us to the *social relations* branch of the precarity literature, which focuses on the various ways of resisting, mitigating and/or acting against, upon and in relation to politically distributed precarities. Here we can see different social networks of care and solidarity, familial relations, protests, social movements and everyday modes of living that are not only mobilised to struggle against existing vulnerabilities in more subtle and self-organising ways but are often born out of the shared sense of vulnerability (Ferreri et al., 2017; Gambetti, 2016; Harker, 2012; Joronen 2019; Joronen and

Griffiths 2019b). Christopher Harker (2012), for instance, shows how familial relations constitute ethical and political spaces that have played a key role in reducing and alleviating heightened exposure to precarity and colonial violence in Palestine (see also Griffiths and Joronen, 2019; Hammami, 2016). Alternatively, feminist scholars have acknowledged the need to pay attention to those manifold, often intimate ways through which vulnerabilities are counter-mobilised as means of corporeal resistance and political action (e.g. Ba', 2019; Brice, 2020; Mattoni and Doerr, 2007; Waite, 2009). Authors like Zeynep Gambetti (2016) and Judith Butler (2016), for instance, have shown how the vulnerability of the body can be mobilised, through disobedience and peaceful protests, as means of non-violent resistance against police violence and other forms of state hostility. In sum, work in this branch tends to focus less on state bodies (albeit they might be seen as key agents of precarisation and violence) and more on ways of mobilising and mitigating precarity through social networks, bodily alignments and different relations of care, solidarity and support.

The final branch we discuss is the work on atmospheres (or moods) of precarity. By drawing explicitly on affect theory, this work explores ways in which policies that undermine access to the staples of everyday existence also erode a subtler social fabric, a dynamic held together not by institutional commitments, codified law or cultural custom but by relational interactions that embed certain expectations about the future (Anderson, 2006, 2010; Horton, 2016). Precarity here is conceptualised as the erosion of a certain faith or reliance on the future and the oppressive sense of insecurity that comes with that unreliability. It is also conceptualised as something felt and embodied (Coleman, 2016; Hitchen, 2016; Woodward and Bruzzone, 2015). Atmospheres of precarity are engendered not necessarily by things that are happening but by things that might happen; it is precisely the condition of not knowing that

creates pervasive feelings or tensions about the insecurity of one's situation.

We recognise two broad approaches within this general description. The first explores how precarity gets embedded into the state's singular right to perpetrate violence. Woodward and Bruzzone (2015), for example, explore how police in Wisconsin use minor inflections of force or what they term 'light touching' (shoulder taps, security checks, pat downs etc.) to remind populations of the state's imminent right to perpetuate violence. Tucker (2017) similarly explores how everyday harassment, particularly around key forms of livelihood, inflects a perpetual sense of anxiety (also see Secor, 2007). The second approach explores how precarity is embedded in the action (or inaction) of state services, particularly in an era of austerity. Here the emphasis is on how impersonal bureaucratic logics and calculative ideologies foment an aura of uncertainty about the state's commitment to the lives of marginal citizens. Thus, Stenning (2020) makes a distinction between the events of austerity – for example, redundancy and housing foreclosure – and more everyday affects which create a pervasive psychosocial mood of unease, sadness and resignation (also see Dawney et al., 2020; Hitchen, 2016). While the practices described here bear some resemblance to those in the governance literature discussed in branch two, it is distinguished by its emphasis on how state agents manufacture what the authors term *atmospheres* of perpetual vulnerability – a pervasive sense of anxiety that operates as an affective force. In this rendering, as Coleman (2016) suggests, austerity is less an event and more a national mood.

In sum, while there are a number of differences in the ways these branches approach the condition of vulnerability, they are more cosmetic than they may at first seem. Yes, these literatures draw from diverse theoretical traditions (Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminist theory etc.) and tap into

different conceptual registers (affect, governmentality, regulation, social relations, intimacy etc.), but they collectively approach the question of vulnerability, first and foremost, as a modality of political control and struggle, that is, as a question of power. Whether the focus is on political economies, neoliberal subjectification, (post)colonial power relations, affective power or social mediations and political agencies of power, it is power relations that fundamentally define the various forms that vulnerability (as precarity) takes. To be clear, this focus on power and politics is not a problem in and of itself. The issue, rather, is not taking seriously the elemental primacy of vulnerability. The role of existential vulnerability, we would argue, is omitted, and in doing so, the distinctive configuration that takes shape between vulnerability, power and politics is not given proper attention. These problems are particularly evident in how states and other bodies are seen as capable of manufacturing and producing precarities, as if vulnerability would be no more than a useful tool manufactured in the hands of a governor. Even in those works where the focus is more on reparative social forms, the emphasis remains on the *power* to resist, mobilise and use vulnerability. In either case, vulnerability appears not as an existential condition – a condition that is primordial and thus comes before and exceeds any and all forms of power – but as a resource, something that can be touched, shaped and transfigured by material agencies towards an array of creative purposes and political ends. The aim of the next section is to illustrate the dangers of this rendering and what is potentially lost when the existential dimension is not fully recognised and acknowledged.

### III Vulnerability as a Condition of Living: Limit, Origin, Response

The aim of this section is to question the inclination to approach vulnerability as a *product* of

power – something composed, utilised and manufactured by various uses and modes of power. To be clear, we do not ignore or deny the various ways agencies (in)operationalise vulnerability; how a range of economic, governmental and affective apparatuses, for example, make choices about how and whether certain subjects, groups or populations can be protected or exposed to vulnerable situations. Our aim, rather, is to tarry with that original situation: the existential condition that subtends any and all power to intensify or mitigate vulnerability. We do this by making two specific points. First, we highlight the problem with conceptualising vulnerability as a positive force. While it is often presumed that social phenomena can be analysed and understood as effects of force (expressions of power), vulnerability, we show, marks out a *limit*. It is not a capacity that can produce, affect or enliven but something that incapacitates, un-powers and so ultimately limits such endeavours. In this regard, vulnerability does not allow us another, more novel ontological standpoint but names the limit of all ontologisation. Second, we argue that there are no functions or uses of power that could be understood as an origin or cause of vulnerability. While states, for instance, can make political choices about how, when and in what sense certain populations become more (or less) exposed to vulnerability, and while these vulnerabilities can be (en)countered through practices of care, protection, mitigation, refusal and so on, none of these are the origin of vulnerability per se. On the contrary, we argue that vulnerability names the irresolvable *origin* of all power. We have organised the following discussion around these two points.

In terms of the first point, it seems to have become common place in the discipline (and beyond) to understand power as a fundamentally relational concept. So common place that it would seem axiomatic. While this approach has been around for some time, it has no doubt intensified over the last two decades as critical

human geography has moved from understanding power as having an epistemological function – as it did in new cultural geography and many of the theoretical positions established during the ‘cultural turn’ – to seeing it as ontological. Deleuze has been particularly influential in this regard. Rather than approaching bodies as noumenal phenomenon whose physical and representational appearance is orchestrated through various modes of social construction, Deleuze understands them as vital becomings: composites of unfolding energies whose shape and capacities express the affective interactions from which they emerge. In appropriating these frameworks, geographers have come to think of bodies in relation to the forces that engender them; energies which have no origin in and of themselves but simply *are* (for a thorough discussion, see Anderson and Harrison, 2006; Marston et al., 2005; McCormack, 2007; McFarlane, 2009; Müller and Schurr, 2016; Ruddick, 2012; Shaw, 2013; Thrift, 2008; also cf. Barnett, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the relation between forces needs to be explained, as do the various events that arise from force differentials, *force itself* is thought as something that is beyond explanation. It is, in Heidegger’s opprobrious use of the word, *meta-physical*: a presumption upon which the ontologies of vital becoming rest upon (Joronen and Häkli, 2017; see also Joronen, 2013). The world is framed as a world of forces, energies which exist as ontological conditions *defining the distributed coming to being* of things, relations and worlds.

It is this ontologisation of force, power and capacity that we want to put into question when approaching the question of vulnerability. Far from seeing vulnerability as yet another composition of power, composed through assembling relations and encounters, we see it as power’s fundamental limit – a limit that is imminent to life itself. As Judith Butler (2010) suggests in her famous work on precarity, what makes life precarious (i.e. vulnerable) is not simply that it

relies upon certain inputs and needs – that is, certain external conditions that determine whether life flourishes or withers – but that those inputs and needs are ones *which no living being has the capacity to ensure*. As she states, ‘there are no conditions that can fully “solve” the problem of . . . bodies . . . they are subject to incursions and to illnesses that jeopardize the possibility of persisting at all’ (Butler, 2010: 29). Vulnerability is, in this regard, a constitutional feature of all bodily beings; bodies depend on that which is beyond themselves to be sustained, to the extent that ‘to live is always to live a life that is at risk’, vulnerable to non-sustaining (p. 30). The key point we take from here is that life involves an ongoing encounter with a dimension that limits and remains beyond the capacities of any living being, and thus of any relational form through which these capacities might actualise. Paul Harrison (2007) aptly calls such encounters a ‘relation with the nonrelational’ – something which life is constantly related to but whose existence is never captured or resolved through such relations (also see Hannah, 2019; Harrison, 2008). Vulnerability simply stands over and beyond all power and capacity: it denotes something which living beings constantly need to deal with and relate to, but which they have no power to ever resolve. Vulnerability is an encounter with a problem over which bodies have no sovereignty. It denotes a limit condition – it marks a situation which we (and all living beings) are only ever *exposed* to.

It is only when vulnerability is seen in such terms that we can fully understand why it cannot be conceived as something manufactured or produced. On the contrary, vulnerability denotes an *un-power*, a crack in all power and its capacities. The point, again, is not simply that living beings are vulnerable to a world that hurts, inflicts and infects, but that we can do nothing to change this state of affairs. Take the problem of hunger. As Rose (2014) suggests, hunger is not simply a problem of having (or

not having) food. Having food is a problem that we can potentially put into relation – that is, we can produce and distribute food and thus choose to mitigate (or exacerbate) hunger. But hunger *itself* stands beyond relation. The facticity of the body's hunger is a situation that cannot be escaped or eluded. It stands before us as a problem that demands to be permanently (and unrelentingly) addressed. Thus, while feeding is a problem that depends on social and political relations, hunger is a problem that stands beyond those relations. It is something to which our bodies are wholly and unremittingly beholden, marking our powerlessness and growing from the un-powering condition of our fragile existence. Hunger, in other words, points at our foundational vulnerability. It underlines how vulnerability does not 'do' but demarcates the *limits* of all doing, and ultimately, of existing. It is in this regard that vulnerability brings to the fore the impossibility to ontologise life in terms of positive forces. Vulnerability operates by limiting and undoing – by incapacitating life – and thus cannot serve as a ground, form or any other ontological nominator for it. It is ultimately what ungrounds and takes away.

This leads to our second point, namely, the problem of framing productive power (the capacity to affect, govern, protect, resist etc.) as the origin of vulnerability. Our argument here is that power – its uses, its productive capacities, the abilities it claims for itself – is *not* the origin of vulnerability but, quite the reverse, vulnerability poses the *origin* of all power. In saying this, we do not wish to diminish the capacity of powerful agents to use violence (or the threat of violence) to perpetuate insecurity or to generate painful, even brutal effects. Nor do we wish to erase the diverse modes of care that can be mobilised to engender unique forms of security, solidarity and hope. Rather, our argument is that all such capacities to heal and hurt, to 'wound and care' (Cavanero, 2009: 30), emerge from a context of radical existential alterity and fragility over which they have no power. In other

words, the condition of being wounded, as well as the condition of being shielded from it, is pre-established by the situation of being prone to vulnerability in the first place. Wounding and caring are not grounded on productive capacities of power but are responses to this originary situation. In not acknowledging this, that is, in presenting vulnerability as yet another affective force (Anderson, 2014: 128–129), we miss how vulnerability emerges not from bodies, affects or distributed agencies but from a situation that sits outside such relations and their terms; a situation no power can ever eliminate or incorporate; namely, from the woundedness of being a living being. Vulnerability, in other words, names an existential situation which power can only ever *respond* to. To not recognise this is to bestow the capacity to choose whether life remains vulnerable or not; as if vulnerability were something created or potentially uncreated, as if vulnerability was escapable, as if there were a potential, a possibility, of a world, a life or a modality of existence, where life could be omnipotently secured and safeguarded from its woundedness. It is such abiding woundedness that poses a constant call upon us. While we can certainly respond to specific insecurities in our bodily, socially, politically and geographically bound lives by acting upon/against/with/in favour of them, our existential proneness to vulnerability remains – it is always and essentially unresolvable, and yet, something that constantly calls us to respond. In this sense, vulnerability names the irresolvable *origin* of all power.

Taken together, the two points above illustrate why vulnerability cannot be posed as one force among the others (Anderson, 2014; Anderson and Wilson, 2018; Coleman, 2016; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, 2019). Rather, it names an original incompleteness and a sense of limits. While a productive power always names a capacity and ability to affect – the 'functioning of the possible', as Maurice Blanchot aptly puts it (1995: 8) – what we argue

defines vulnerability, is the way it exposes life to what undoes, un-powers and limits its capacities. And yet it is precisely this *limit* condition that situates vulnerability as the *origin* of all power. In bringing living beings face-to-face with vulnerability, those beings are summoned to *respond*. All living beings seek capacity in the face of its peculation; fragile constellations of power coming to the fore for their finite time as a response to the problem no constellation of power can resolve. *This is the essential problem of power*. Even as vulnerability calls power to respond, it also laughs at all such effects; the content of its gift is empty. Power is hence always already fractured, undermined, lacerated through and through by its own woundedness; its own incapacity to resolve the problem for which it was summoned. Recognising the woundedness at the heart of power is to resist being enamoured. It is to see that whenever relations of power are countered, it is their inherent fragility and limitedness that is highlighted; whenever power remains powerful, it is the vulnerability and exposure of life that is required; whenever vulnerabilities are healed and nursed, or mobilised as means to govern and dominate, vulnerability keeps lingering within these endeavours, abiding with them as their own most impossibility, fragility and finiteness (e.g. Joronen, 2017, 2019; Rose, 2014). This is the politics of living with vulnerability – the politics of living with the woundedness that does not heal. It is this indispensable need to respond to this woundedness which we elaborate next.

#### **IV Politics of Wound: Beholden Claims**

Above, we have explored how vulnerability exposes a fundamental hurt or a wound at the heart of living, what we are calling ‘the woundedness of being a living being’. This wound is part and parcel of all living beings; it is always there, open and raw, impossible to heal or erase.

We further argued that this wound is the irresolvable origin of power, something power needs to respond to without being able to resolve. Thus, even as woundedness names the origin of every act and position of power, we need to understand all such acts and positions (and the modes of power they create) as always already enfeebled, compromised or, what we term, *wounded*. All power simultaneously responds to and is hampered by the wound at its heart; a wound whose opening can never be healed by the diverse forms of power it calls forth. In this section, we show how such woundedness engenders what we call the ‘politics of wound’; a politics that operates with the woundedness of living.

It is our contention that the politics of the wound introduces a very different conception of politics. It is a perspective that cannot be paralleled with more established readings in geography (and beyond) that ground politics in action (e.g. Arendt, 1958), power (e.g. Legg, 2016), affect (e.g. Woodward, 2014) or other productive capacities (e.g. Anderson, 2014) – that is, concepts that celebrate the diverse transfigurations of doing. On the contrary, this is a politics of supplication, borne from the condition of being wounded. In this sense, it bears some similarity to conceptions of politics that emphasise receptiveness and ‘response-ability’ (e.g. Barad, 2007, Beausoleil, 2015; Brown et al., 2019; Haraway, 2008; Joronen and Häkli, 2017). However, while these works connect the responding nature of politics to the ever-present prevalence of the other (Barad, 2014: 161), multispecies responsibilities (Haraway, 2008: 88–93), affective relations between bodies (Thrift, 2008: 175–176) or to the ontologising event (Joronen and Häkli, 2017: 572–573), our concept is connected to the existential condition of woundedness itself. To illustrate this politics more thoroughly, we suggest it can be characterised by three distinct features: first, the politics of the wound is *beholden*; second, it cannot be thought or determined in terms of its *doings*;

and finally, it is always and fundamentally *limited* in terms of its claim to power. The remainder of this section explores these features in more detail.

In terms of the first implication, understanding power as responsive situates the scene of politics in very different terms. When power is understood as primordially productive, active and vital, politics appears as a relational process where forces are enrolled to create, produce or operationalise particular apparatus, systems or machines. At the heart of such a conception is an image of the subject – or other actant (distributed, non-human etc.) – as essentially *capable* of politicising. To be sure we understand that this capacity is conceived as emergent in and through relations and the various ways those relations unfold. Our response to this position is not that there is no choice, nor is it to suggest that subjects or actants cannot be politically creative. But it is to suggest that as a response, our politics cannot be thought in terms of decision, choice or freedom. On the contrary, our conception of politics begins with a living being who is utterly and wholly *beholden*. All politics starts from this situation. And while politics is certainly activated by the situation of beholdenness, we must understand such activations as taking shape within the limited terms that vulnerability provides. Such a conception is similar to Foucault's in the sense that we understand power (relations) as something from which we can never fully escape (e.g. Foucault, 2014; Legg, 2018). It is something to which we are bound in our need to respond. And yet, what is ultimately inescapable for us is the wound itself. It is because our being is beholden to a vulnerability that transcends anything that a subject, group, actant, agent or any other (relational) power could ever do, that politics can never be a question of escape. On the contrary, politics marks precisely the impossibility of escaping our beholdenness; the impossibility of finding a safe haven; a space beyond where one could potentially live unwounded and unexposed.

This leads to the second implication; namely, that the politics of the wound expands our horizon of what potentially counts as politics. In our discussion, there is no compelling need to frame politics as something active, vital or productive, altogether 'capable' and 'powerful'. Indeed, to think of politics as a response means approaching it not in terms of the bright light of action that we can see or the emergent forces that power sets in motion, but in terms of the diverse responses that woundedness elicits. The key to understanding this position is to recognise that a response can be anything. It can be active and passive, real and imagined, activating and deactivating, creative and suggestive. Because power is predicated on a primordial dimension of exposure, vulnerability takes shape in infinite ways. We are prone to the unpredictability of other people, to the harshness of the elements, to the unknowability of the future; there is nothing that is not a potential threshold of exposure. Given this, we can imagine politics – when understood as a response – taking shape in equally infinite ways of responding. Indeed, to perceive power and politics in terms of the wound is to perceive how diverse and creative responding to the wound can be. For example, elsewhere we have explored modalities of politics that are operationalised through inaction and withdrawal, that is, by *not* producing institutional orders of protection and care (see Joronen, 2017; Rose, 2014). In such instances, it is precisely the vulnerability of living that is being exploited to evoke harm. Politics in these forms is a politics of inaction, deferral and retreat, rather than doing, creating or producing. The point is that whether taking the form of harming and killing, improvement and care, abandonment and repudiation, resistance and countering, action or inaction or solidarity and help, it is not power, but *woundedness*, that allows power to remain powerful – capable of being affective. It is for this reason that we understand politics as the capacity to play with life's fragile situation. It

finds its power, not from the capacity to affect nor from the power to resist but from creatively mining *the cracks of life*. For Derrida (2001; Derrida and Grossman, 2019), such cracks are precisely wounds: openings that scar our bodies and fracture our soul but also prompt a multitude of ideas concerning how we attempt sovereignty over our lives. Thus, while politics is limited in terms of what it can achieve, it is not limited in terms of the forms and shapes it can take to respond to and play with the woundedness of living.

This leads to the final implication. The politics of response can never be *omnipotent* or *heroic*. What the wound exposes is that politics is fragile, compromised from the beginning and thus susceptible to denial, encounter, transformation and resistance. To understand this, we need to understand politics as a thoroughly paradoxical event. On the one hand, it is the wound that affects the very constitution of power – it defines it, calls it, limits it and grants it its power. And yet, it does so in a manner that no actual form of power (no actual response) can ever resolve. It is the fact that we *must be* hungry that the will arises to feed, it is the fact that we must be cold that the will arises to shelter and it is that fact that we cannot see the future that the will arises to prepare and anticipate. But in doing so, vulnerability ensures that no preparation, no shelter and no food can heal the wound itself. We will always be hungry, we will always need shelter and no preparation will ever fully protect us from the vulnerability of the future. Power, in this regard, is a *double bind*: it creates a site of obligation – a demand to feed, to shelter, to heal and to prepare – and simultaneously a site of futility. On the one hand, we cannot not respond to vulnerability. But on the other, no response will ever be sufficient. The wound at the heart of politics does not simply disappear in the shadow of power's will to virility. On the contrary, it follows politics, haunts it, lacerates it and ensures that its capacity remains incomplete. Giving with one hand and taking back

with the other, the wound activates politics by virtue of ensuring its failure.

To suggest that power is not (and can never be) heroic is thus to recognise that power operates by virtue of its incapacity and enfeeblement. It is the perpetual irresolution of power – the fact that it can never resolve the problem that gave it life – that guarantees its future. It is the fact that power cannot close the wound that it must emerge (again and again) to resolve the matter. Power is the futility of Lear, screaming into the storm; a power that may be loud, resolute, caring and even nourishing but is ultimately defined not by what it affects but what it fails to affect – what it can never affect. This is why we should be wary of being enamoured by what power does. Yes, power emerges in ever new creative forms. But the ingenuity of its shape – the complexity of its apparatus – should *not be confused with its efficacy*. This is not to say that politics cannot cause harm. We are not denying that politics can and does perpetuate cruelty, pain and injustice in how it distributes vulnerabilities. But no such pain could be caused if life were not already prone to it. Naturally, the reverse is also true: all power is wounded and cracked open to numerous ways of mitigating, cancelling, refusing and playing with its forms. It is in this sense that power is always already hampered by its own woundedness. Power can only ever be a *limited claim* to power – a limited desire for power – in the face of the vulnerability that gives it life; an always already failed ambition to resolve the problem whose very problematic breaths it into being.

## V Conclusion

This article is about what a proper engagement with vulnerability can tell us about the nature of power and the avenue it opens-up for rethinking politics in terms of its woundedness; what we term the 'politics of wound'. While the current theoretical milieu celebrates capacity, force and potential and attends to all the things that power

can do, our aim has been to provide a check on this exuberance by illuminating the existential situation in which all such claims to power sit. In doing so, we have argued that the problem of power transforms from being a question about how to produce, capacitate and affect, to how to respond to life's woundedness. This means rejecting both the fantasy of omnipotent force and the politics of futility. Indeed, our critique resides precisely in between such terms: the inclination to think politics in terms of strong or weak, loud or quiet, effective or ineffective, revolutionary or supplementary, healing or harming, countering or affirmative – that is, in terms of mere doing (see also Athanasiou, 2016). It is only when we begin from a position of beholdenness, when we start with the presumption that no response is ever heroic, able or sufficient *enough*, that our conception of politics makes room for thinking politics in a manner that is far more sensitive to spatial and ontological differentiation than productivist, supplementalist and vitalist frameworks can measure. In this sense, our aim is not simply to unmask our everyday political apparatus, but more importantly to *unground* them, to un-power them and to bring them back to the vulnerability at their heart. Such an approach not only offers a critical reading of prevalent forms of power but, more importantly, undermines their modes of ontologisation, whether related to affect, gender, subject-making, race or some other mode of differentiation (e.g. Blaser, 2014; Joronen and Häkli, 2017; Sundberg, 2014; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Yet, this should not be the sole take-away point. Understanding politics as a response further allows us to explore the wide-ranging capacities living beings summon to mitigate, exacerbate or otherwise mobilise power as a responding *play with* vulnerability. Understanding power in such terms helps us avoid the tendency to be enamoured by power and opens our perspective to recognise politics in terms of its manifold beholdenness and its infinite responsiveness. This is a

politics that works not by celebrating or hailing but by recognising and acknowledging a collective starting point: the incurable wound of being a living being.

## Notes

1. To emphasise the reliance of power on vulnerability, we use 'vulnerability' and 'woundedness' to refer to the existential dimension, and 'power' to the political dimension, or what we refer to as the 'politics of wound'. Although this goes against the grain of rather established distinction between precarity (as political) and precariousness/vulnerability (as existential) – a difference, which we do elaborate when appropriate to literatures we are referring to – our choice of wording, in this regard, is intentional.
2. Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche plays a powerful underlying role in the way power and force have been ontologised in the discipline. Like Aristotle's *physis*, Plato's *eidos* or Hegel's spirit, Nietzsche's concept of willing, in all of its vital movement and open-endedness of the world, poses an elemental condition constitutive for the becoming of worldly things. In Deleuze's (1983) reading, Nietzsche's 'will to power' represents an original wanting, an underlying primordial energy that arises from the differential encounters between forces. Willing suffuses the world. All phenomena and events are borne of willing and the movements and differentials that these energies engender. Thus, willing is, as Nietzsche (1968) suggests, 'the most elementary fact from which a becoming arises' (p. 339).

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