

8 March 2016

First Keynote (9:45am)

**Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability:  
Undoing an oppressive form of (wilful) ignorance**

Pamela Sue Anderson

ABSTRACT

The French feminist philosopher, Michèle Le Doeuff, has taught us something about 'the collectivity', which she discovers in women's struggle for access to the philosophical, but also about 'the unknown' and 'the unthought' (Le Doeuff 1989, 128). It is the unthought, which will matter most to what I intend to say today about a fundamental ignorance, on which speaker vulnerability is built. On International Women's Day, it seems appropriate to speak about – or, at least, to evoke – the silencing which has been imposed on women by an oppressive form of ignorance. My question is: how do our resounding voices as women – on 8 March 2016 – avoid what feminist philosophers have distinguished as wilful forms of silencing? Silencing exploits vulnerability; and speaker vulnerability is an exposure to either violence or affection, in its dependence on an audience. My response seeks to undo the silencing of women by transforming an ignorance of vulnerability into a distinctively ethical avowal. To see the significance of this undoing, we will consider how our contemporary global world reduces vulnerability to an openness to violence, ignoring what has been unthought: an openness to affection. A wilful ignorance of vulnerability develops not as a lack of knowledge, but its disavowal – on which various forms of oppression are built. An active disavowal of thinking (the unthought) is the other side of a striving for invulnerability; and this striving is encouraged by a social world which remains ignorant of its own wounding, as well as its own potential for ethical relations in vulnerability. Like *la mauvaise foi* of the French existentialist, invulnerability is a form of self-deception; and those who claim it embrace ignorance of their own and others's vulnerability, too.

**Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability:  
Undoing an oppressive form of wilful ignorance**

Pamela Sue Anderson

As I stand before you today, I can hear the voices of women resounding from my own past, especially women's voices from the last decade of the twentieth-century in Durham. In the present, I know of women in philosophy who might have been silenced by their audiences; and I must also confess to hearing women philosophers's voices whose mutual vulnerability (with my own) I did not recognise.

On International Women's Day 2016, I would like to admit, in particular, my 'wilful ignorance' of speaker vulnerability - an ignorance which I will explain later in this talk. But it is enough to say from the outset, that in my own attempts to gain confidence in speaking and developing reciprocal relations in philosophy, I had disavowed my own vulnerability; this was self-deceptive. Teasing out the paradox surrounding speaker vulnerability in philosophy is part of my task today; the other part is 'arguing' that mutual vulnerability in philosophical relations is what should characterise collective work in philosophy – or, at least, in feminist philosophy.

At the turn of the century, on 8 November 2000 (to be exact), I myself had the good fortune – or, perhaps, the not so 'good' experience - to speak to Durham University Philosophers on whether 'feminist philosophy is a contradiction in terms'<sup>1</sup>. I had a rather large audience for my talk in the Philosophy Department on that day, because most of them - male students and male philosophers - had mistaken my name for someone else: thinking it referred to the Other Pamela Anderson whose name right through the 1990s tended to appear regularly in newspapers. This confusion of interest in 'me' had been encouraged by the appearance of a blonde-haired figure of a sexy woman, along side my name and my title, on the poster announcing my Philosophy talk for that day?!? Needless to say, this blonde figure was an addition to the original poster notifying philosophers of my talk. In the 1990s, especially, I was

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<sup>1</sup> In 2000, I spoke to the Durham Philosophy Faculty seminar on 'Is "feminist philosophy" a contradiction in terms?'

often not believed to be a ‘philosopher’, when my name was seen... So, was the name, with the addition of another woman to the poster, a joke?! Whatever the case, it remains a fact that on that particular 8<sup>th</sup> of November in Durham I was, first, not imagined as coming to speak about ‘philosophy’ because of my name, but I was, second, not believed to be ‘feminist’ because of what I actually said!! Instead I was accused, by one of the then prominent male philosophers, of ‘disappointing’ the assembled audience, for speaking in abstract terms about feminist epistemology which, that male philosopher claimed, ‘in no way could be “feminist”, since lacking the particularity, concreteness and relationality required for women, and so, for “feminism”!’

I was quickly defended by the woman friend-philosopher ‘Chair’ on that occasion, Dr Soran Reader...who came out of her role as chair, in order to respond to the so-called ‘disappointment’ at hearing me. And yet on reflection, I have realised since then, something about speaker vulnerability, and the silencing, which confronted me as a woman in philosophy and a speaker, who was not heard, because at least some of the audience did not identify me as ‘a knower’ with authority on feminist philosophy.

Today I might wonder what ‘I’ as a speaker could have done differently in relation to my audience... Indeed, was my intention on that day to seem ‘invulnerable’ – like the philosophers who confidently discuss abstract issues in epistemology without any hint of vulnerability – in order to be taken seriously as a philosopher? But perhaps, even if I had spoken about particularity, concreteness and relationality on that day, I would still *not* have been heard speaking as a philosopher. I have to conclude that the situation was unresolvable by me alone.

However, since that occasion I have learned something extremely significant about what the feminist philosopher, Michèle Le Doeuff, in 1980 had called for: ‘collective work’. Le Doeuff claimed that this work is ‘plural’ and necessary for women seeking access to the philosophical. A collectivity was – and is - needed, despite the fact that access to philosophy had traditionally been mediated – for a philosopher - by the supposed ‘invulnerability’ of one great mentor-philosopher. Following Le Doeuff, instead of relying on ‘one great man’ in philosophy to pave

the way, I would like to advocate (for younger women and men in philosophy) a new reliance on collective work – modelled on our mutual vulnerability as speakers and audiences – the aim is to cultivate reciprocal relations to the ‘unknown’. Plus, this collectivity means today that my present talk can draw generously from a range of women in philosophy in and beyond my own group; this includes Michèle (Le Doeuff), Soran (Reader), Jennifer Hornsby, Rae Langton, Nancy Tuana, bell hooks, Judith Butler, Ann Murphy, Kristie Dotson and Simone de Beauvoir.

How different would my experience have been, together with Soran, if a collective group of women had supported us in the audience on 8 November 2000 in Durham Philosophy?

### **1 Collective work and the unthought: following after Le Doeuff**

My own implicit awareness of a collectivity of women in philosophy began gradually in the last decade of the twentieth-century, as the late Soran Reader and I organised various occasions for Philosophy here in the North East of Britain. Most notable is the occasion in 1994, when we hosted Michèle Le Doeuff’s visit to Durham – at which time Le Doeuff gave a Royal Institute of Philosophy (RIP) lecture – for which we had a vastly different audience than I had as ‘Pamela Anderson’ - but Le Doeuff, a woman in philosophy, our invited speaker in 1994 for the RIP in the North East, is part of another story, about a different audience, which I will leave for another time!

Much earlier, in 1980 Le Doeuff had described the lesson of collective work in her now classic essay, ‘Long Hair, Short Ideas’. The lesson is, in Michèle’s exact words, ‘that “I do not do everything on my own”, that I am a tributary to a collective discourse and knowledge, which have done more towards producing me than I shall contribute in continuing to produce them’ (Le Doeuff 1989, 127) – and also that

[T]he only attitude which makes collective work possible and necessary [is] a ‘collectivity’ whose scope obviously extends beyond the ‘group’ of people working together (Le Doeuff 1989, 127).

As Le Doeuff goes on to explain,

The belief which [...] emerged from [her early...] experience [prior to 1980] of collective work is that – [still quoting Le Doeuff] the future of women’s struggle for access to the philosophical will be played out somewhere in the field of plural work...Here, one has the impression of experiencing a new rationality, in which a relationship to the unknown and to the unthought is at every moment reintroduced (Le Doeuff 1989, 128).

Thus, Le Doeuff forecasts the significance of a collectivity, which she discovers in twentieth-century women’s struggle for access to the philosophical; but she also continues to teach us about the role of ‘the unknown’ and ‘the unthought’. The latter - the unthought – will play a crucial role in my accounts of both ‘speaker vulnerability’ and a fundamental ‘ignorance of vulnerability’.

## **2 Silencing and speaker vulnerability**

The vulnerability of a (woman) speaker follows from her dependence upon an audience; if she is to be heard, her dependence requires an audience who is both willing and capable of hearing her as a speaker and a knower. As (feminist) philosopher Jennifer Hornsby also explains, in her essay, ‘Disempowered Speech’, reciprocity between speaker and audience is essential. In Hornsby’s words, ‘The existence of reciprocity is actually a perfectly ordinary fact, consisting in speakers being able not only to voice meaningful thoughts but also to be heard’ (Hornsby 1995, 134).

Again, the Le Doeuffian idea of collective work should be brought into projects seeking more or better reciprocity in philosophical relations; and I take, as my focus, a speaker’s relations to her philosophical audience as crucial here – for addressing the unknown, but also for seeking what has remained unthought; that is, the mutual vulnerability of relations of dependence (and affection), such as speaker and audience reciprocity. We must not go too quickly on this point: the fact of communicative reciprocity and the implicit dependence of a speaker on her audience still does *not* mean that these needs – of reciprocity and of interdependence - for the speaker’s

relations are easily met in philosophy. As many young women in philosophy today know (perhaps better than I thought when young), philosophical relations have tended to be built upon an assumption of the 'invulnerability' to decisive attack.

Yet, as I have come to learn from other feminist philosophers – notably from those engaging with 'an epistemology of ignorance' – philosophers who claim an invulnerability (in speaking) are self-deceived. Instead every speaker – whatever their sex or gender - is *vulnerable* precisely because they are also dependent on an audience not only to hear them, but to recognise them as a knower. So, to repeat, a philosopher is open to not having her speaker's needs met; this means vulnerability. Silencing is the risk a speaker runs, since an audience might not hear her or recognise her as a knower. But there can be different forms of silencing a speaker.

My concern is both that the audience actually needs to be willing and capable, to hear what a speaker says and that the speaker must also perceive this audience-competence, if silencing is to be avoided. A mutuality is required for successful communicative reciprocity, if not, silencing happens. To explain this briefly, I will appropriate a distinction from a 2011 *Hypatia* essay, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing', where Kristie Dotson identifies two forms of speaker-silencing: 'quieting' and 'smothering'. On the one hand, a speaker is vulnerable to quieting, if an audience refuses to listen. In general, this means that the speaker is not treated by their audience as a knower (Dotson 2011, 242-3). Feminist epistemologists have identified quieting as a form of oppression in silencing women of colour, in particular (cf. P H Collins 2000, 69-81).

For example, the African-American feminist author bell hooks is perhaps the best known black feminist in the twentieth century to have demonstrated, in her *Ain't I A Woman* (1981), the way in which black women speakers in the USA were undervalued not only by male audiences, but were not recognised as knowers by white feminists either. bell hooks continues to write about lack of recognition. In her 2012 essay, 'True philosophers: Beauvoir and bell', includes women in philosophy such as the white woman, Simone de Beauvoir, and the black woman, bell

hooks *herself* (hooks 2012, 227-37). Basically, the undervaluing and misrecognition of women in and outside of philosophy reflect how specific dependencies of women as speakers have not been met. But the *range* of women who have been silenced – by quieting - and the precise *nature* of their speaker vulnerability remain underexplored (more on this below).

On the other hand, a speaker is vulnerable to ‘smothering’, as a second form of silencing, when the speaker truncates her own voice and so, the content of her message; that is, the speaker silences herself (Dotson 2011, 244). In fact, smothering as a self-silencing is a coerced silencing, when the speaker realises her audience would not understand and/or not accept certain content; this smothering silences content for which the audience’s competence is lacking, or, which the speaker knows is too risky to express to that particular audience. Many instances of coerced silencing exist: smothering a speaker is the only example of self-silencing I will mention, insofar as it helps me to illustrate speaker vulnerability. And this vulnerability risks an audience’s ignorance which, as a result, does not meet a speaker’s needs. The speaker cannot depend on her audience to hear her; and the audience could not undo her silencing.

In contrast to smothering, quieting as the first form of silencing (mentioned above), is determined by controlling images – such as those making up the philosophical imaginary, as uncovered by Le Doeuff. This quieting and its philosophical imaginary produce stereotypes as fixed images, built upon ignorance of a woman as a knower. In quieting, individuals and groups are treated as ‘not-knowers’. Furthermore, this ignorance, which is maintained by an audience in cases of quieting, has been built on a more fundamental form of *wilful* ignorance.

### **3 Vulnerability and wilful ignorance**

The American feminist philosopher, Nancy Tuana, defines ‘wilful ignorance’ as ‘a systematic process of self-deception, a wilful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one’s role in that exploitation’ (Tuana 2006, 11). For example, philosophical excavation of ‘a racial contract’ has disclosed a direct link connecting systematic racial oppression and wilful ignorance (cf. Mills 1997, 18). This

ignorance is not the opposite of knowledge. Instead it is an active disavowal of one's own and another's vulnerability. Moreover, such active ignorance of a speaker as a knower produces violent acts of silencing, which infect the self-deceptive who deny life's vulnerability. A black woman's speaker vulnerability is materially and socially open to this violence, insofar as her life is dependent on others, who are wilfully ignorant of oppressive relations; and an audience, which is privileged by race and gender, exploits this systematic process of self-deception.

No one has done more in recent years than the American feminist philosopher and queer theorist, Judith Butler, to show the myriad ways in which we, all – whether lesbian, gay, queer, trans... or hetero- sexual, are dependent on others and vulnerable due to 'precarious life'.<sup>2</sup> Life is, according to Butler, precarious because, roughly, we are dependent on others, and beside ourselves when undone by loss of the other.<sup>3</sup> But in fact, it is also bad faith (that is, self-deception) to expect - unthinkingly - a safe movement from this shared vulnerability as embodied speakers to a reciprocal, ethical accountability as a protection of one's vulnerability from violence. Moreover, the potential of vulnerability as openness to affection is denied in violent forms of self-deception.

To illustrate the problem of speaker vulnerability and violence, due to wilful ignorance, allow me to read some passages from bell hooks's own account of, what I suggested (above) is, an audience quieting her as a speaker. She is vulnerable to an audience's disavowal of her as a knower. In fact, bell hooks herself describes how she had to learn that self-silencing takes place; and it did for her. After being disavowed – quieted – by a white audience in her academic life she learned to perceive when it is too risky to discuss her views (as a black woman), when it is too dangerous to tell the truth! In a few lines from bell hooks's now classic feminist text, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), we can see when and where bell herself explores the silencing of a black woman speaker by an audience of white men and white women. Also, a few

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<sup>2</sup> Butler 2004, 128-51.

<sup>3</sup> Butler 2004; cf. Butler 2009; 2015.



lines from bell hooks's account of her own first failed attempt to pass an oral examination for her PhD, in *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1997, 133-4), we can see when and where she learns that self-silencing is required; and I suggest that this is so, because she is vulnerable as a speaker to wilful ignorance.

**An Example: bell hooks**

**Racial oppression as the wilful embrace of an ignorance which infects those who...**

So, first of all, let us hear how bell hooks describes a nineteenth-century black woman speaker named, 'Sojourner Truth', in the USA:

[T]he white man who yelled at Sojourner, 'I don't believe you really are a woman,' unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood. In the eyes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century white public, the black female was a creature unworthy of the title woman; she was mere chattel, a thing, an animal. When Sojourner Truth stood before the second annual convention of the women's rights movement in Akron, Ohio, in 1852, white women who deemed it unfitting that a black woman should speak on a public platform in their presence screamed: 'Don't let her speak! Don't let her speak! Don't let her speak!'" (hooks 1981, 159).

Thus, in *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks portrays the black female figure of Sojourner Truth as a figure who exposes these white women and the white men, who are aiming to silence a black woman for not being a woman! Yet Sojourner Truth, moves the truth forward, by exposing a collective silencing – as a systematic process of self-deception - infecting nineteenth-century slave owners. In this reciprocal exposure of the audience's vulnerability and the speaker's, to the truth of a black woman, Sojourner actually bears her breasts to her audience; and so, we see the undoing of an oppressive form of ignorance. The mutual vulnerability of the female slave who speaks out and the audience who is forced to see the reality of a black woman's life equally

forces a change, at the very least in perception, of womanhood (hooks 1981, 159-160ff). We glimpse here the potential in vulnerability for transformation.

Second, bell hooks admits not only the quieting which continues in racism and sexism, after slavery in the US, but the smothering of her own voice. She herself experiences the coercion into silencing her voice, not unlike the voices of other women of colour, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In other words, bell hooks born 1953, will recall that at 19 years of age: '[W]e were by and large silent. Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed – that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot' (hooks 1981, 1). Thus, this smothering of speakers exposes their vulnerability in both the self-silencing of black women and the silencing of black feminism.

Allow me to read – more about - how it was that bell hooks spoke openly at her first oral PhD examination. At the same time, an audience's quieting was already at play preventing five white examiners from hearing bell hooks as a knower. In fact, the white examiners failed her for answers which they did not want to hear; she told the truth about race and gender and they refused to listen to what she knew all too well. Now, let us listen to bell hooks as she captures a wilful ignorance of her vulnerability in telling the truth about race and gender. Notice the speaker vulnerability which the PhD examiners exploit by wilfully embracing ignorance of racial oppression, or at least of bell hooks's account of it in teaching.

I pass hours of written exams. My orals take place in a small room with five white people present. When I am asked how I will teach James Joyce, I respond that I have no intention of teaching his work and give my reasons why. I am totally honest. I make it clear that I have read Joyce but am unmoved by his writing and that of many of the so-called great white male writers. I speak about the need to have an unbiased curriculum, one that is diverse and varied. Since I have so clearly read everything required of me and indicate that in the discussion,

I believe I have done well. When they tell me with smiles that I have failed, that I can try again in so many months, I am stunned. I know I will never willingly face them again (hooks 1997, 133).

bell hooks reflects on herself – that stunned self – retrospectively and writes the following in the third person:

*...By the time she walked the short distance home from the exams, brushing the tears from her eyes, she understood the way the system worked and was reconciled. She would have to start over somewhere else (hooks 1997, 133-4).*

...

Of course, I might well ask myself, at this point, if I had been one of those white examiners, hearing bell hooks speak, would I have passed her, when it could be said that she did not exactly answer the question in her oral examination about teaching James Joyce? This question is about knowledge. However, it might reflect a disavowal – refusal - to grasp the actual vulnerability in relations between students and examiners, speakers and audiences, philosophy students and philosophy teachers. As audiences, do we, examiners, teachers, mentors... actively deny our own relational needs for reciprocity and inter-dependence in philosophy? There continues to be a great need for us to learn about race and gender in philosophy.

Later at another graduate school, bell hooks would understand how to answer the questions as required! At the same time, she still felt the need to have her views – what she perceived as the truth – heard! Her way forward resists complete self-silencing by speaking out in her graduate classes. But listen to her disappointment, as she reflects that, even in her intimate relation to an otherwise attentive boyfriend, who was also supportive of her writing life. He clearly did not understand her yearning to be heard:

*...[H]e doesn't understand why I need to share my ideas in the classroom, why I need to be heard. He thinks I would spare myself a lot of pain if I would just sit in these classrooms and be silent (hooks 1997, 207).*

In demonstrating how she manages not to be completely silenced, bell hooks avows herself; that is, she accepts her vulnerability as a speaker and as a black woman who wants to change both her life and the lives of those others around her. So, she continues, struggling with (her) speaker vulnerability in classrooms and in her writing life. We might say that she looks for mutual affection in vulnerability.

Clearly, in sharp contrast, I have never suffered as a woman of a non-privileged race, from either the long and shocking history of slavery and ongoing racism in the US or from racial and ethnic oppression in the world. Nevertheless, I have questioned how I might have been silenced in trying to speak as a (feminist) philosopher. Without a doubt, I have tried to protect myself by denying my own vulnerability as a speaker and as part of an audience in philosophy (e.g., as an autonomous thinker). And yet, I am readily aware that it is never easy to be heard in Philosophy; and much in the world of Philosophy is structured for, and by, men who automatically claim for Philosophy a privileged sort of ‘invulnerability’ – but of course, I am suggesting that this will mean that we deceive ourselves about our own vulnerability, even in autonomous philosophical relations. A collectivity strengthens a woman speaker.

Now, returning to my opening example, I was vulnerable as a speaker – as a feminist philosopher - in that particular seminar in Durham’s Excellent Philosophy Department. Did I try to protect myself from criticism by not doing philosophy the way the men in philosophy expected ‘a woman’ – or, a ‘feminist’ - to think and to speak? Whatever answers we might give about this, I did want to be taken seriously as a woman philosopher. So I might have silenced myself - smothering – the full reality of feminist epistemology? Or, I might have been silenced, in the sense of quieted, by the prominent male philosopher who claimed I had disappointed my audience. Why couldn’t the abstractness of my Philosophy talk be ‘feminist’, too? I have already agreed that collective work is necessary for women’s access to the philosophical, enabling a mutual vulnerability in philosophical relations.

But I should be clear: my contention is that speaker vulnerability derives from dependence on an audience. This vulnerability is compatible with philosophers who think autonomously, whether great thoughts or not. My modelling of philosophical relations on speaker-audience reciprocity is just that a relational model for philosophers's lives; but I am also trying to generalize this relational model to all of life's relations. This is to assume an interdependence of our lives which, as Butler has demonstrated, is seen most acutely in loss of love, loss of health and loss of life itself. Moreover, Butler adds our relations to organic and inorganic things, too. But if we stay with my focus - a speaker's dependence on an audience renders - both sides of this mutual relation vulnerable; and this mutuality, I propose, is of great significance for not only those who have been marginalised, or dismissed (say, women), as if only they are 'the vulnerable' in philosophy.

In fact, we are all vulnerable to being undone by the other when our needs cannot be met. We see this on a large scale in the loss of a loved one - on whom we have been dependent - but we are equally deceiving ourselves, if we disavow our speaker vulnerability as philosophers. It would seem that vulnerability as an openness renders our relations to the world, to others's lives, and to life in general vulnerable to either violence or affection. Vulnerability is literally being liable to wounding, to openness or exposure; this vulnerable relationality makes us liable to harm and infection, but also to mutual affection.

#### **4 Undoing an oppressive form of wilful ignorance**

My current research involves arguing for an 'ethical' vulnerability; this would require striving for mutual affection; but this affection can be disavowed by oppressive forms of ignorance. Nevertheless, my intention in this research is to demonstrate that vulnerability - of any kind - is not reducible to an exposure *to violence only*; and so, vulnerability is not merely a woman's problem - as in the violation of a woman's bodies. It is not fair to assign vulnerability to a separate class, a different gender, another race or a group of disabled persons...who are said to make up 'the vulnerable'! We are all vulnerable, so marginalising or instrumentalizing 'the vulnerable' reflects,

instead, an oppressive form of wilful ignorance. In response to such wilfulness, we should avow vulnerability as an openness to the potential (capability) for inter-relational affection. I will return to this avowal, but my argument confronts serious opposition due to the harsh realities in life.

Returning to the theme of today's conference, 'Resounding Voices: Women, Silence and the Production of Knowledge', I would like to extend my brief exploration into speaker vulnerability (above) – in order to explore, all too briefly, what is deeper (more primordial) than the exposure of women's voices to, and the speaker's dependence upon, the violence of silencing. There exists a fundamental ignorance of vulnerability itself.

The critical question raised (above), in my concern with philosophical relations of vulnerability, is the nature of a speaker's openness to self and other affection. On the one hand, speaker vulnerability is an openness to affection, leading to positive changes (in one's knowledge), or, to becoming undone – and eventually, to becoming transformed by those changes, especially one's loss of affection is by way of violence; that is, due to life's precariousness, we are undone in becoming natal and mortal; birth and death involve changes for good and for not good in our relations to world, which we carry with us in all our relations. On the other hand, speaker vulnerability is an exposure to, and dependence on, an audience, which can be wilfully ignorant of our mutual vulnerability, in silencing a woman's voice in philosophy. There is silencing of, in more technical feminist philosophical terms, a woman's 'testimony' of the very idea of corporeal vulnerability, in *not* recognising a female speaker as a knower who is trustworthy and whose vulnerability is highly significant for understanding our precarious lives together.

Extending this understanding of vulnerability to all of life, we can understand, as Butler has shown, life's precariousness; and this recalls the Le Doeuffian idea of a collectivity. Collective work by feminist philosophers has unearthed the reality of human vulnerability, which nevertheless has been wilfully disavowed. To repeat, as Tuana says, '*a wilful embrace of ignorance infects*' those privileged audiences and privileged speakers. One problem, which surfaces again

and again, as we dig deeper into this matter is the wilful ignorance of vulnerability itself; that is, the vulnerability of the speaker, as well as a more fundamental ignorance of vulnerability become obvious in the precarious ways, in which human lives are, or are not, oppressed.

Again, it is Butler who has led women – who are lesbian, gay, queer, straight, trans... and so on - in philosophy, in ethics, in politics to an awareness of this deeply problematic ignorance of vulnerability. Her writings on precarious life and the precarity of lives differentially located, expose often tragically those bodies on a political edge of life. Becoming aware of bodily vulnerability, however, does not necessarily led to affection. Instead, all too often, responses to bodily vulnerability erupt into, as Butler argues, militaristic politics. Retribution all too naturally follows violent exposure to one's own vulnerability.

Globally the wilful ignorance of vulnerability itself has (ironically) given some people reasons for violence. Consider the situation in the USA where an escalation of gun violence happens far too easily. One example of an American news report tells (us) that a 29-year old man shot a woman in a cinema in Seattle, Washington, when his concealed gun accidentally went off. He was carrying the weapon, he said, because of his fear of mass shootings. This strange logic generates an ending that is precisely the opposite of what was desired: rather than offering protection, his gun made the world less safe.

The man was striving for invulnerability. Like many USA citizens, he thought his bodily vulnerability could be overcome with possession of a gun. But the data is very clear: the very presence of more and more guns continually increases the violence. Striving for invulnerability – whether as the man with a gun for 'self-protection' or the philosopher with an argument for his shield against his vulnerability - puts us at a serious human risk. [And it](#) misses the opportunity that vulnerability can offer.

Ultimately the challenge in my arguing for ethical vulnerability is indicated in various ways by Butler's many publications on precarious life, precarity and vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> Butler points out that an increased sense of vulnerability is one that is often accompanied by a similarly increased sense of violence; this is re-enforced by there being nothing in the recognition of one's own embodied vulnerability that necessarily inspires generous love, empathy or tolerance. Nevertheless, Butler claims that recognition of our lives as dependent on others – especially, in grief, desire or rage – could be the ground on which we might build non-violent affection – such as non-militaristic political action; but this would require us, in Butler's words, 'to attend to, abide by' (2004, 29), what I have suggested is 'the unthought' (Le Doeuff 1989, 128). In other words, we must think of our dependence on others, 'by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself' (2004, 29) Butler associates vulnerability in politics with grief, or mourning, which motivate either retaliation or other action forcing us to change – in the face of loss which can never make us the same again; loss of health, of life, of love, never leaves us unaltered.

To conclude, I began my talk on International Women's Day 2016 with women's voices resounding and Michèle Le Doeuff's provocation for collective work in gaining access to philosophy, the unknown and the unthought, which need to be reintroduced continually, in order to avoid a fixation on the completeness of one's knowledge. I also admitted that as a woman in philosophy I have wilfully disavowed my own vulnerability as a speaker in philosophy: above all, I wanted to be an autonomous thinker – not a 'vulnerable' woman. However, I suggested at the outset that this was a self-deceptive, if not, a self-defeating stance, for a philosopher to take. I have endeavoured to demonstrate how speaker silencing takes place in both 'quieting' of a speaker, as a not-knower, by an audience and 'smothering' of a speaker by her own self, whether coerced or not. In exploring how bell hooks's writings offers accounts of both the quieting and smothering of women of colour, I suggested that Nancy Tuana has

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<sup>4</sup> Butler 2004, 28-29; cf. 2009; 2015.



helpfully pointed out the way in which a disavowal of vulnerability itself needs to be undone as an oppressive form of wilful ignorance. This undoing, I suggest, should take place by recognition of our mutual vulnerability instead of an acceptance of a systematic process of self-deception that ‘infects those who are in positions of privilege’, whether these positions are that of the great mentor-philosopher or that of the white examiners of an African-American, woman PhD candidate.

In the end, I must admit that there is nothing to compel the philosopher to accept my challenge – to recognise their vulnerability in philosophical relations – nevertheless, no one can deny in all honesty that they will not be undone by others in love, bereavement or rage. Thus, I urge us to increase our collective work on relations of mutual vulnerability as, at the very least, a philosophical task worthy of any one who is at all serious about the production of knowledge by and for women in philosophy.

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