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Good Intentions, Flawed Delivery: The Humanitarian Response to Vulnerability

Butler and Ticktin each propose their own version of human vulnerability, describing the role of this universal attribute in the context of international entanglements and humanitarian crises. In this paper, I will consider both their views as I compare their notions of vulnerability, demonstrating how they qualify and complicate each other within the theme of well-intentioned humanitarianism gone wrong. I will argue that, whereas Butler considers the theoretical possibility of an egalitarian humanitarian response to our universal vulnerability, Ticktin examines the Western humanitarian response to vulnerability that occurs in reality. I will examine Ticktin's exploration of how the Western response to vulnerability, while intended as humanitarian, incidentally creates problematic political conditions that implicitly enact modes of violence as they encourage refugees to actively perform their vulnerability to acquire legality under the illness clause.

To begin, it is important to describe what Butler views as the optimal response to our universal, bodily human vulnerability. Butler posits that the West can respond to our universal human vulnerability by affirming this natural vulnerability as we learn to understand and accept "our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another," thus creating a new politics that transcends transnational borders (Butler 30). This is the response to vulnerability that Butler idealizes, an arguably utopian perspective that takes the notion that "we're undone by each other" to its logical, benevolent extreme (Butler 23). When we realize that we are both indirectly and directly implicated in the lives of others, just as they are in our lives, we might grow to understand

that we are all responsible for the maintenance of our common humanity. Butler argues for such a world, a world in which we are cognizant of both our suffering and the suffering we cause others—a world guided by a "principle…by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered," a world which she insists must come "from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability" (Butler 30). Yet Ticktin suggests that this kind of humanitarianism—what at first glance might be perceived as a morally grounded "apprehension" of vulnerability—is not, in fact, the panacea that Butler makes it out to be. By apprehending vulnerability, Ticktin argues, we face the "unintended effects of a politics based on moral imperatives," opening ourselves up to a situation in which we end up hierarchizing perceived levels of suffering, creating a system that *thinks* it "can recognize suffering wherever [it] see[s] it," but in reality maintains its own internal political bias regarding who "qualif[ies] as a recognizable sufferer" (Ticktin 15, 24).

Thus, this Western response—a self-consciously humanitarian one that seeks to "alleviate suffering...in the form of emergency medical care"—paradoxically creates for the immigrant conditions in which suffering is aspired for, disease is dreamed of, and pathology is praised, for such circumstances of bodily weakness become "interchangeable with life as a politically recognized subject" in the country hosting these refugees (Ticktin 13-14, 16). Butler's notion that "we're undone by each other" thus begins to take on a revised, more complicated meaning. "If we're not [undone by each other], we're missing something," Butler argues (Butler 23). But what might we be missing? Ticktin presents us with multiple cases in which institutional figures—such as nurses, social workers, doctors, or government officials—remain decidedly *un*done by the narrated suffering of refugees, deliberately opting to deny them aid. This phenomenon is exemplified by Ticktin's depiction of a crying Algerian man begging for papers on the grounds that he has recently suffered a heart attack. His tears suggest that he is performing his suffering to fit the structural narrative that is required for him to be seen as worthy of assistance. Yet the nurse

coldly points out that all he has suffered is a heart murmur, and declines to believe him when he says he needs to remain in France to take care of his wife and mother. Even his admitting that he is experiencing suicidal tendencies does not move the nurse, and he is dismissed. Ticktin believes the reason for this is that, while he had emotively performed his suffering, he "elicited a negative feeling in [the nurse]"—his suffering, it appears, was not morally legitimate in the nurse's eyes (Ticktin 119). She was not "undone" by him—she did not find herself captivated by his story, affected by his experience. In this kind of situation, Butler might say that we're "missing something"—but what?

Ticktin would argue that the narrative is missing the "racialized, gendered, and sexualized contours…[that] help define [a body's] moral legitimacy" (Ticktin 91). These socialized, politicized configurations of sentimentality, hidden in stereotypical norms of recognition, remain inscribed in the institutional figures who end up policing the boundary separating those worthy and those *un*worthy of papers. Providing papers is, arguably, a milder iteration of Butler's utopian vision of using our mutual suffering as a framework to address the "common human vulnerability"—for, providing papers in order to "alleviate suffering" requires the acceptance of refugees as "grievable" lives that thus merit at least some level of protection (Butler 31-2).

In order to be "grievable," these lives, according to Ticktin, must be vulnerable. So, while Butler maintains that we become "at risk of violence by virtue of [the] exposure [of our vulnerability]," Ticktin disagrees (Butler 20). She states that this exposure of vulnerability is desirable in the case of refugees—in fact, only by performing their vulnerability can refugees be recognized as humans, and escape the violence plaguing them in the native countries which they flee. "Suffering must be configured as a particular biological form with affective resonance"—in order to qualify as morally legitimate, suffering has to be proudly performed by the refugee, who is put in "the uncomfortable position of searching for evidence…[to] prove one's 'humanity,'

worthy of humanitarian exception" (Ticktin 2-3. 13). Ticktin thus demonstrates that the refugee takes on an active role in the exposure of their own vulnerability—the refugees are the ones who pull back the curtains to the gloomy truths of their "HIV+ [status]…[their] unusual pathologies…[they are the ones who] remember and recount" their experiences with sexual violence in hopes that it will strike a chord of compassion in the hearts of the nurses, doctors, and social workers who take turns evaluating them (Ticktin 4).

Yet, since papers are not provided to all, these frames of recognition regarding who is most deserving of papers and who most inspires compassion in institutional figures "enable[s] a form of 'armed love' in which...moral imperative...is accompanied by practices of violence" (Ticktin 5). Thus, this mild iteration of the "humanitarianism" that Butler theorizes will create a new egalitarian politics paradoxically becomes another way in which violence is wrought on refugees—violence in that the state's exception-based filtering of refugees, aside from a number of refugees deemed "sick...disabled...[and] second-class" enough to stay, turns most of them away, leaving them poor and stateless, with nowhere to go (Ticktin 4-5). This violence is not explicit in that it does not involve the direct killing and suffering that is usually invoked in times of war; instead, it is structural, in that it "reinforce[s] an oppressive order...reproducing inequalities and racial, gendered, and geopolitical hierarchies" (Ticktin 5).

Complicating matters is the fact that even if a refugee is granted papers, since work permits are not simultaneously granted, the situation "pave[s] the way for greater exploitation of their misery, making them work in situations of virtual slavery or prostitution" (Ticktin 97). Thus, in a way, Butler's assertion that we are "at risk of violence by virtue of [the] exposure [of our vulnerability]" is indirectly supported by Ticktin. The paper-contingent politically recognized refugee, vulnerable in their holistic dependency on the state granting them papers, becomes economically exploited by this allegedly humanitarian state. Thus it becomes clear that underneath

the superficially well-meaning mask of humanitarianism can lie the dark roots of a system that oppresses the refugee and precludes a truly egalitarian reaction to vulnerability from evolving.

Ultimately, both Butler and Ticktin qualify and complicate each other's notions of human vulnerability. Butler's theoretical positing of an unbiased humanitarian response to our universal vulnerability is immediately called into question as Ticktin examines how the Western humanitarian response plays out in reality. Ticktin ultimately suggests that while such a response might be intended as humanitarian, it indirectly begets violence as it constructs the political conditions that implicitly enact modes of violence in their encouragement of the refugee's performance of vulnerability. Considering this analysis, it is worth investigating further into how we may—if we may at all—respond to issues of transnational immigration in a way that is purely humanitarian and does not hide contrived forms of exploitation underneath a superficially altruistic surface.