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New Materialism, Micropolitics and the Everyday Production of Gender-Related Violence

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Abstract: This paper assesses how a new materialist ontology can inform the sociological study of gender-related violence (GRV). The new materialisms are relational rather than essentialist; post-anthropocentric as opposed to humanist; and replace dualisms such as agency/structure, reason/emotion and micro/macro with a monist or 'flat' ontology. To make sense of GRV from within this ontology, we explore violence as assemblages of human and non-human matter and draw upon the DeleuzoGuattarian micropolitical concepts of 'the war machine' and 'lines of flight'. While violence may supply a protagonist with new capacities (a line of flight), it typically closes down or constrains the capacities of one or more other parties in a violence-assemblage. This theoretical exploration establishes the basis for a methodological approach to studying GRV empirically, using a Deleuzian toolkit of affects, assemblages, capacities and micropolitics. The paper concludes with an assessment of what is gained from this new materialist ontology of GRV.

Keywords: affect; assemblage; gender-related violence; line of flight; micropolitics; new materialism; violence; war machine

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1. Introduction

This paper's aim is to explore what the relational, post-humanist/post-anthropocentric and monist ontology of the new materialisms can bring to the sociological study of gender-related violence (GRV). It identifies the distinctive features of a new materialist approach to GRV, and also considers how this ontology translates into a methodology for empirical study of gendered violence. Its starting point is the broad and inclusive definition of violence that is gender-related, as set out by Alldred and David (2014, p. 15). GRV encompasses physical and psychological domestic violence; sexual assaults and harassment; sexist bullying and intimidation in schools, colleges and workplaces; violence associated with misogyny/misandry, homophobia and transphobia; institutional, state-sponsored or conflict-related violence against women or non-normative sexualities (Alldred forthcoming). GRV is also intersectional with other stratifications such as race, class, sexuality, age and dis/ability (Carbado et al. 2014; Collins 2017; Sundaram et al. 2019). Furthermore, GRV is not only perpetrated by individuals/groups but also may produce and reproduce the binary gender order, patriarchy, colonialism, and other sociocultural, religious and political norms and values (Colpitts 2022, p. 153).[1]

'New materialism' is a portfolio term for a range of relational, affective and more-than-human perspectives that have emerged in the social sciences and humanities as part of what some have described as a 'turn to matter' (Fullagar 2017; Lettow 2017). This refocusing on relational, affective and more-than-human perspectives is perhaps more accurately considered a shift from a previous 'cultural turn' (Nash 2001) that dominated sociological theory in the latter part of the last century (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 7); and a turn *toward* the more-than-human liveliness of the material world (Bennett 2010). This turn (or return) also acknowledges convergences between what Braidotti (2022, p. 108) has called

'renewed materialism' and Bennett (2010, p. xvi) 'vital materialism', and the posthuman and post-anthropocentric ethics of many indigenous ontologies and cosmologies, in which both human and non-human matter contribute to the production of social life (Rosiek et al. 2020; Sundberg 2014, p. 33).

New materialist approaches aim to reinvigorate understandings of the production of the social world and human history as materially embedded and embodied. They are *relational* in place of essentialist; *post-anthropocentric* rather than humanist; and replace dualisms such as agency/structure, reason/emotion and micro/macro with a *monist* or 'flat' ontology (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 9; van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010). We subsequently argue that these approaches offer novel and challenging insights into GRV.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After a very brief review of the main threads within GRV, we set out in more detail the relational, post-anthropocentric and monist themes underpinning the new materialist and posthuman ontologies we use to re-think GRV and social inquiry. This section is structured via the scholarship of feminist materialists such as Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti, whose work acknowledges the more-than-human, relational and affective ontology of Deleuze and Guattari. To make sense of violence from within this ontology, we draw upon the DeleuzoGuattarian conceptions (1988) of assemblages, the 'war machine' and 'lines of flight', and subsequently use these to establish a materialist ontology of GRV. This theoretical exploration establishes the basis for a methodological approach to studying GRV empirically, within a Deleuzian toolkit of affects, assemblages and capacities, after which the paper considers how this methodology translates into practical research methods. The paper concludes with an assessment of what is gained from this new materialist ontology of GRV.

2. Theorising Gender and Violence

The widely-used term 'gender-based violence' (GBV) dates back at least to the United Nations (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, and associated policy statements from the World Health Organization (1997, 2001). In these documents GBV was treated as synonymous with 'violence against women' (VAW), which was considered a manifestation of 'historically unequal power relations between men and women' and 'one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men' (United Nations 1993, p. 2). For these organisations, GBV was an aspect of inequity that undermines efforts to enhance well-being, autonomy and universal human rights (World Health Organization 1997, no page numbers, see also, Ertürk 2009). VAW has remained the overwhelmingly dominant theme in the GBV literature (see, for example, Russo and Pirlott 2006; Walby et al. 2014; and Terry's (2007) collection, in which all 12 contributions addressed violence against women). However, some GBV literature has broadened this focus, to include intimate partner violence (IPV) among same-sex couples (Naidu and Mkhize 2005) and within families (Maher et al. 2021); violence linked to transphobia (Wirtz et al. 2020); and sexual violence against men, women and LGBTQ people in conflict situations (Dolan 2014; Meger 2010; Yagi et al. 2022).

This emphasis on VAW may be explained by two limitations of the GBV approach. First, a social constructionist assessment of 'gender' as a sociocultural overlay upon male and female bodies (Russo and Pirlott 2006, p. 180); second, the suggestion of a simplistic causal relationship, in which violence is shaped by gender roles and status in society (Meger 2010, p. 124; Russo and Pirlott 2006, p. 181). Further, Walby et al. (2014, p. 209–10) have suggested that the specific terminology of 'gender-based violence' has had the effect within sociology of ghettoising activity such as domestic violence beyond the more general sociological and criminological study of violence in society. Furthermore, they argue that violence is itself fundamentally gendered: 77 per cent of violence perpetrated by strangers is against men, while 83 per cent of violence against women is by people known to them (Walby et al. 2014, pp. 204, 209; Walby and Allen 2004, p. ix).

The more critically-theorised term 'gender-related violence' (GRV) was first introduced by El-Bushra and Lopez (1993), as a means to acknowledge the power imbalances

within a patriarchal society, with a breadth that spanned prostitution, pornography, female infanticide and enforced sterilisation as well as sexual assault, rape and domestic violence. More recently, GRV has been applied as a concept to critique the contemporary gender order, including gender binarism and gender and sexual normativities (Alldred and David 2014, p. 15; Alldred and Biglia 2015). This terminology sought to problematise inequalities and power differentials across all forms of social difference, including race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexual orientation (Alldred and David 2014, p. 15). In this more comprehensive conceptualisation, violence that relates to the concept of gender is not only structured by gender inequality, but also may

> (. . .) include violence (actual, threatened or symbolic) that is enabled by the very concept of gender, and so recognises gender normativity, the insistence of a gender binary, homophobia, transphobia, as well as injuries of women's inequality to men–sexism, misogyny, sexual violence and sexual harassment or coercion (Alldred n.d., quoted in Alldred and David 2014, p. 15).

As a formulation, GRV thus reflects the critical orientation of third wave feminism and queer theory toward the contemporary gender order (Alldred and David 2014, p. 15), articulating not only with feminist and LGBTQI activism but also with critical gender and sexualities research and intersectionality studies. Translated into practice, GRV is consequently an intentionally-inclusive term, encompassing 'sexist, sexualising or norm-driven bullying, harassment, discrimination or violence, whoever is targeted' (Alldred and Biglia 2015, p. 662). This critical perspective has underpinned two major European Union (EU) research programmes on gender-related violence (Alldred and David 2014) and sexual violence in European universities (Alldred and Phipps 2018). The current paper considers what explicitly re-thinking GRV within feminist and new materialisms can add to the sociological analysis of gendered violence. The following section outlines three features of the new materialisms: their relationality, post-anthropocentrism and monism. Subsequent sections assess what this materialist ontology means: first for violence in general, and then specifically for GRV.

3. Renewing Ontology: A Feminist New Materialist Perspective

The new materialisms now influencing the social sciences and humanities have been informed by a disparate skein of social theories including actor-network theory (Latour 2005), agential realism (Barad 1996), biophilosophy (Ansell Pearson 1999; Massumi 1996), feminism and queer theory (Grosz 1994; Haraway 1997), philosophical posthumanism (Braidotti 2013), and Spinozist monism (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze 1988). New materialist ontology focuses upon the interplay of material forces within the unstable assemblages of human and non-human matter that accrete around bodies.

Like post-structuralism, this 'new' materialism is concerned fundamentally with the everyday workings of power within physical and social spaces, but has shifted its focus firmly from 'social construction' to the social *production* of the material world (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 7), emphasising matter rather than textuality. This shift has been embraced variously by feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett and Karen Barad. As Braidotti (2022, pp. 110–11) suggests, these new materialisms are 'about being embodied and embedded' and 'looks toward the vitality of matter and its self-organizing capacities'. At the same time, the new materialisms acknowledge difference in place of similarities, while recognising the need for mutual dependence and care across the entirety of human and non-human materiality (Braidotti 2022, p. 111). Meanwhile, Haraway (1991, pp. 157, 177) considers that a focus upon matter supplies the opportunity to reveal the continuities between humans and the rest of the material universe, and the means to overturn many other dualisms including those that oppress specific individuals, groups, classes, genders and species. This, she suggests, is the basis for 'tearing down a Berlin Wall between the world of objects and the world of subjects', revealing that nature and culture are inextricably interwoven in all embodied entities (Haraway 1997, p. 270).

Despite the divergences and indeed contradictions between the different new materialisms that have informed feminist scholarship (Hein 2016), for the purposes of this materialist analysis of gender and violence, three common theoretical strands may be identified: relationality, posthumanism/post-anthropocentrism and monism.

On relationality, the new materialisms acknowledge a material world comprised not of stable entities with fixed, inherent or 'essentialist' attributes, but rather a *relational* and uneven world that emerges in unpredictable ways around actions and events (Potts 2004, p. 19), as different human and non-human materialities interact. The focus in this relational ontology is no longer upon individual bodes or other non-human objects such as technologies or physical locations, but upon the 'assemblages' of disparate bodies and other materialities that accrete around events (for instance, a violent incident). Nor are these assemblages static or stable; instead, they are labile and continually in flux, as relations (bodies, things, social institutions and constructs) join or leave (Deleuze 1988, p. 128; Lemke 2015). This relationality requires that we ask of a body or any other materiality not what it *is*, but what it can *do* in a specific context (Buchanan 1997). This has the effect of de-stabilising supposedly unitary phenomena such as 'human', 'woman' and 'power' (Braidotti 2011, p. 130; Colebrook 2013; Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 275), and for the purposes of this paper: violence.

On posthumanism, the new materialisms step back from the anthropocentric emphasis upon the consequences of social processes for individual human bodies or human subjectivities that has dominated social scientific inquiry. Acknowledging the 'thing-power' (Bennett 2010, p. 2) and liveliness of all matter opens up the possibility to explore matter's capacity to affect other materialities in its own right (in other words, without the intervention or mediation of human agency). We may explore how things other than humans (for instance, a tool, a technology or a building) can be social 'agents', making things happen. The aim of such an inquiry is consequently to examine how bodies and non-human matter affect and are affected (DeLanda 2006, p. 4), and what capacities to do, think and feel are thereby produced in bodies, collectivities of bodies, and in other matter. Significantly, this shift from a privileged and agentic human to 'flows of affect' in assemblages acknowledges that things, organisations, social formations and concepts contribute to social production as much as—if not more than—human bodies/subjects.

Finally, on 'monism', the new materialisms are sceptical about the 'structures', 'systems' and 'mechanisms' that many social scientists have proposed to explain power and continuities in the social world. Power is explored in new materialist ontology not by positing 'causal' or 'explanatory' social structures such as 'capitalism' or 'biomedicine', but by unpicking the play of forces or 'affect economy' (Clough 2004, p. 15) that assemble around the actions and events that produce and reproduce the world and human history. These forces may be physical, psychological, social or cultural, and– including the material products of thoughts, desires, feelings and abstract concepts (DeLanda 2006, p. 5); together these forces constitute the 'micropolitics' of daily life. This ontology thereby dissolves boundaries between what are conventionally regarded as the 'macro' level of institutions and social organisation and the 'micro' level of human desires and experiences, recognising that what these aspects of the social have in common is an ability to affect or be affected. Such an orientation also cuts across a range of dualisms that invest much social theory: structure/agency, nature/culture and mind/matter (van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010, p. 155).

These three strands not only transform social theory foundationally, but also alter the way in which empirical data is to be generated and analysed. In place of a focus on individuals and their attributes, what human bodies can do must always be considered as contingent: a consequence of the micropolitical flows of affect within the assemblages that constitute specific events. Rather than an overarching concern with humans and their practices, the post-anthropocentrism of the new materialisms entails acknowledgement of the vital affectivity of all matter. And instead of using 'social structure' as an explanation of how power is distributed among human bodies, the concern must be with the micropolitics

of daily life, and how the capacities of assembled human and non-human matter establish flows of power and resistance within the events that constitute the social world and unfolding human history (Fox and Alldred 2018). All these are highly relevant for a feminist materialist understanding of gender and violence, as the remainder of this paper now addresses.

4. Violence, Lines of Flight and the War Machine

Feminist new materialist scholars including Bennett, Braidotti and Grosz have drawn ontological inspiration partly from the Spinozist strand within Deleuzian philosophy (Deleuze 1988; Deleuze and Guattari 1988, pp. 256–60; see, for example, Bennett 2010, pp. xii–xvii; Braidotti 2013, p. 56; Grosz 1993, p. 171). This approach, which Deleuze (1988, pp. 125–26) called 'ethology', is one of the most conceptually-developed expositions of the relational, post-anthropocentric and monist micropolitics of the new materialisms described in the previous section. As such it has provided social scientists with a conceptual toolkit to operationalise new materialist ontology for theoretical and empirical purposes (Fox and Alldred 2017, 2021; Bennett 2010, pp. 21–28; DeLanda 2006; Duff 2014; McLeod 2014; Potts 2004; Ringrose 2011). The following paragraphs summarise the ethological concepts of 'affect', 'assemblage', 'capacities' and the micropolitical movements of 'territorialisation', 'de-territorialisation' and 'lines of flight'.

The post-anthropocentrism of Deleuzian ontology is neatly encapsulated through the concept of *affect*, which replaces the more familiar term 'agency' (usually reserved within sociology as a descriptor of human action). Deleuze (1988, p. 124) takes his definition of 'affect' directly from Spinoza: it is 'a capacity to affect or be affected'. Affects may be physical, psychological, emotional, sociocultural or political. They are a feature of *all* matter (ibid: 125): affects establish the vibrancy, vitality, creativity of all matter. However, affects should not be considered as essentialist or inherent attributes of a materiality such as a body, tool, place or other object. Rather, affects are necessarily reciprocal (that which affects is inextricably tied to that which is affected), always emerging relationally and contextually. For instance, in the context of joinery, a screwdriver's principal affect entails tightening screws, in a conflict situation, a novel affect transforms it into a weapon.

This relationality is confirmed by ethology's concept of *assemblage*. An only-partially satisfactory translation of Deleuze's original '*agencement*', that is: an 'arrangement' of matter (Buchanan 2021, p. 20), assemblages are constituted from the capacities to affect or be affected of two or more materialities (whether 'human' or 'non-human'), for instance, a human hand and a hammer. Assemblages develop in unpredictable ways around actions and events as affects 'flow' between different materialities in ways that Deleuze and Guattari liken (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 6) to an underground rhizome: branching and multiplying, breaking and re-connecting. In ethology, assemblages rather than single bodies or things become the unit of analysis, as it is only when a body or a thing assembles with another body or thing that its *capacities* for action or reaction emerge (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, pp. 88–89). Any event or interaction should consequently be considered and analysed as an assemblage of affective materialities. So, for example, it is a 'gun-assemblage' comprising gun, shooter and target (and on occasions many other materialities such as alcohol or drugs) that kills people: not simply a gun, as argued by those favouring gun control; nor a person alone, as claimed by gun enthusiasts (cf. Latour 1999, pp. 176–77).[2]

Finally, ethology operationalises the 'flat' or monist ontology of new materialist perspectives via its focus upon *micropolitics* (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 216). A micropolitical focus addresses flows of power and resistance within assemblages: flows constituted by the affects within the assemblages of daily life. These micropolitical flows of affect (which cut across micro/macro and agency/structure dualisms found in mainstream sociology) establish the limits upon what bodies and other matter can do within a specific assemblage/event/context. They shape matter's capacities: sometimes they diminish capacities to act, other times they strengthen or enhance powers to act (Deleuze and Parnet 2007,

p. 60), and thereby produce the entirety of the social world and human history (Fox and Alldred 2018, p. 325).

In place of the top-down social structures often employed in sociological explorations of power, Deleuze and Guattari suggested two aspects of this micropolitics of affects, both of which are highly relevant to the discussions of violence and GRV that follow. The first of these: 'territorialisation'/'de-territorialisation' describes how affects may specify or generalise what a body can do–its capacities (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 9). For instance, a stone may be territorialised/specified by a hand that uses it as a weapon. When that weapon is subsequently cast aside, it is de-territorialised/generalised back into a stone, thus re-gaining its previous multiple capacities. Sociocultural norms and values associated with gender and sexualities–such as gender roles and gendered codes of sexual conduct–can be powerfully affective, specifying (territorialising) behaviours and interactions. While some territorialisations may last a lifetime, bodies or other matter may always be de-territorialised/generalised by other affects. If this generalisation is particularly potent, it may instigate what Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 88) called a 'line of flight' that establishes new possibilities for action (for instance, de-territorialising a gender identity or sexuality).

The second micropolitical movement (described by Deleuze and Guattari 1984, pp. 286–88, as 'molar' and 'molecular' forces), we have elsewhere (Fox and Alldred 2017, pp. 32–33) renamed as aggregation/disaggregation. Aggregating (molar) affects classify or group bodies together, for instance, classifying people into nationalities, social classes, races and genders, as well as establishing social identities such as 'patient', 'housewife', 'mother', or 'victim' of violence, even though the people thus aggregated may be in most other respects quite dissimilar. By contrast, disaggregating (molecular) affects act singularly on bodies, and as such have the capacity to undo or undermine aggregations, opening up possibilities beyond the constraints of a particular stratification or social identity.

These two movements of specification/generalisation and aggregation/disaggregation provide the starting point for re-thinking violence (and in the next section, gender-related violence) within a monist ontology.

From a humanist perspective, while violence against some animals has been legitimated for food or clothing (Worsham 2013, p. 55), acts of violence toward other humans are typically considered both blameworthy and morally reprehensible (Austin 2019, p. 169). Efforts at justifications for violence–such as claims by a Nazi death camp guard to have 'only been following orders' or inebriation as an excuse for physical or psychological assault–are rarely accepted. Only in specific circumstances such as military combat or liberation struggles against illegitimate political regimes, is violence considered legitimate and justified. This morality, which is both normative and relativistic, requires sociologists to tread a cautious path when apparently 'explaining' violence (specifically gender-related violence) by reference to cultural or social causes such as social inequalities (Hearn 2013, p. 164).

The ethological framing just developed supplies an opportunity to step beyond such a humanist perspective. It enables violent acts to be explored in terms of the micropolitics of affective flows within assemblages of human and non-human matter, rather than focusing on static categorisations such as 'perpetrator', 'victim' or 'survivor' (Henriksen and Miller 2012, p. 455). In place of debates over the individual or sociocultural 'causes' of violence (and corollaries of blame or responsibility), the question that this relational ontology asks is 'how do violent affects within assemblages modify the capacities of bodies in these assemblages?[3] This allows analysis of the micropolitics of violence: exploring how a violent act enhances or limits capacities to act, think or feel (Henriksen and Miller 2012, p. 456; Higham 2018, pp. 293–94).

This ethological framing of violent events was applied by Ringrose (2011) in her study of teenagers' engagements with social media in two school settings (one located in an urban socially-deprived area, the other in a rural, well-to-do location). This study revealed how social media created gendered and sexualised identities, as well as heterosexually-loaded affective and bodily relations between young people. Ringrose discussed in detail

one specific incident, in which 'Louise' physically struck her school friend 'Marie', after the latter had reportedly called her a 'fat slag' online (Ringrose 2011, p. 609). Ringrose argued that Louise's violent response supplied her with a de-territorialising 'line of flight' that transgressed both school and wider sociocultural norms of 'passively aggressive femininity' (ibid). This enabled Louise to 'break out of and rupture the normative strata of the school affective assemblage' (Ringrose 2011, pp. 611–12)—though she was swiftly re-territorialised by the school authorities, who not only required her to apologise to Marie, but also territorialised and pathologised Louise as aggressor and bully (Ringrose 2011, pp. 610–11).

Ringrose's analysis of this case study drew upon a DeleuzoGuattarian framing of violence (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 396), and their distinction between a 'state apparatus' that wields its power (on occasions through legitimised violence) to assert laws over citizenry (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, pp. 359–60), and a 'nomadic' assemblage that Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 354) called 'the war machine'. They argued (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 513) that the state apparatus is a more-than-human assemblage whose affects 'striate' the social world according to certain organising principles (for instance gender binarism, market economics, colonialism).

The war machine–which confusingly, Deleuze and Guattari emphasised does not in fact have war as its objective (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 417)—seeks to replace the 'striations' of the state apparatus with a 'smoother' nomadic space (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 423). A war machine creates lines of flight ('becomings'), to push back the territorialisations of the social world in 'a war of becoming over being . . . Becoming different, to think and act differently' (Deuchars 2011, p. 2). As Colebrook (2009) notes, the war-machine 'far from being alien to rational man and humanism, enables his existence, and provides a means of thinking his escape'. Writing and music can be war machines according to Deleuze and Guattari (1988, p. 513), though the war machine can also institute 'an entire economy of violence' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 396) that can indeed be directed against 'state' striations of law, regulation and subordinations (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 422).

This analysis of state apparatus and war machine, smooth and striated spaces supplied Ringrose (2011) with a means to make sense of the violence in the Louise/Marie/school assemblage, revealing three distinct affective movements. To begin with, Marie's online insult was an act of psychological violence that had the effect of locating Louise firmly within the gendered and sexualised striations of school culture (Ringrose 2011, p. 609), thereby constraining her capacities (for example, limiting her self-esteem and her status among her friends). Next, Louise's subsequent act of physical violence upon Marie was her effort to shift herself via a line of flight from these striations into a smoother space (Ringrose 2011, p. 611): to flex her nomadic capacities as a 'warrior' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 352) freed from the constraints of school culture, and enter the realm of the de-territorialised (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 381). To apply Deleuze and Guattari's rather florid language, such a warrior is

> (. . .) a pure and immeasurable multiplicity, the pack, an irruption of the ephemeral and the power of metamorphosis . . . (that) brings a *furor* to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public, a power *(puissance)* against sovereignty, a machine against the apparatus (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 352, italics in original).

However, in short order, Louise's line of flight into smooth space was curtailed by an act of symbolic violence by the school authorities, as the 'state' apparatus of school rules and a victim/bully binary (Ringrose 2011, p. 611) re-asserted its striations over recalcitrant school students, humiliating Louise and evaporating any vestiges of her brief line of flight from the striations of school culture.

While there is a risk that this DeleuzeGuattarian celebration of the nomadic warrior could romanticise violence (including gendered violence), their ontology of affects, assemblages, becomings and lines of flight can supply a starting-point for a new materialist

and relational sociology of violence. First, it acknowledges violence as an affective flow: a perspective fully congruent with the general understanding of 'violence' as an intense force (Hook and Wolfe 2018, p. 872), whether natural–a storm or a volcanic eruption, or social–for instance, an act of military aggression or a riot. Violent affects may be physical, psychological, social or symbolic. These affects assemble at least two materialities, but perhaps more typically a *multiplicity* of human and non-human elements (for example, the girls, social media, teachers, school and school rules caught up in the assemblage described by Ringrose). This relationality shifts analysis away from a simplistic dualism of 'perpetrator' and 'recipient' to instead always explore 'violence-assemblages' and the affects that produce them.

Second, violence always takes place within a broader affect-economy (for instance, a domestic environment or a drunken night-out), with other affects shaping what bodies can do (capacities). Moreover, as Deleuze and Guattari (1988, pp. 6–8) note, these affects flow rhizomatically: branching, dividing and coalescing. In the affective assemblages of day-to-day events that (in a monist ontology) constitute the social world and the entirety of human history (Fox and Alldred 2018; Hook and Wolfe 2018, p. 873), violence breeds further violence, as Ringrose's example confirms.

Third, there is a relational and micropolitical economy of affects surrounding violence. Violence re-distributes material capacities within an assemblage, as also illustrated in the case study just discussed. When it comes to human 'social' violence, this re-distribution may either enhance capacities: a 'line of flight' away from specifications or aggregations toward a 'smoother' space of action (Louise's attack on Marie); or diminish them–re-asserting those territorialising striations (the discipline and humiliation of Louise by school authorities). Consequently, while some violence-assemblages may enhance political, ethnic or religious liberation struggles, others may reinforce the capacities of the 'state' or other collectivities to resist such struggles. However, while violence may on occasions open up a smoother, de-territorialised space for one party–enhancing capacities for becoming-other (a line of flight), such a line of flight will typically shift another party to the violence into subservient, submissive, constrained or controlled physical, psychological or social (in)capacities (Higham 2018, p. 300).[4]

With this new materialist ontology of violence established, the following section applies this to the specific focus of gender-related violence.

5. The Micropolitics of Gender-Related Violence

From within the new materialist framing of violence just outlined, it is possible to forge a relational analysis of gender-related violence. More specifically, to explore violence-assemblages that involve *gendered or sexualised* bodies. The following paragraphs articulate with and develop the new materialist ontology of violence outlined at the end of the previous section, applying the three themes of relationality, post-anthropocentrism and monism that have been the organising principles throughout this paper.

From a relational perspective, gender-related violence (GRV) *is the flow of violent affects within assemblages of materialities, some of which are gendered and human.* These violent affects may be physical (a blow or sexual assault); psychological (an insult or threat); sociocultural (misogynistic or homophobic behaviour); or symbolic (gender binarism; sexist, transphobic or homophobic laws). It is these affects (capacities to affect or be affected) that assemble gendered bodies within specific GRV events. However, making sense of GRV requires exploring a particular violence-assemblage not simply by focusing on the violent affect alone, but upon the entirety of the complex 'affect economy' (Clough 2004, p. 15) that constitutes this assemblage. Though in most cases these other affects will not be 'violent', they are still inextricably caught up in the micropolitics that produce the violence-assemblage. For example, Parkinson's (2019) study of domestic violence in the aftermath of a natural disaster (Australian bush-fires) made the point that this violence took place within a complex web of human social interactions associated with domestic living, childcare, management of household budgets, employment outside the home, social

networks, as well as affects specific to a particular circumstance, and those linked to broad social, economic or political contexts.

Such a focus on the wider affect-economy of violence-assemblages also confirms that the study of GRV will almost always need to acknowledge the intersectionality of gendered, racialised, classed and homo-/trans-phobic violence (Braidotti 2022, p. 182). However, a relational, assemblage-focused perspective necessarily moves beyond a framing of intersectionality founded upon essentialised identities and bodies aggregated within narrow gender, ethnic or social class classifications. While intersectionality describes the social forces (including GRV) that specify and aggregate bodies (Puar 2012, pp. 50, 61), countering these forces requires an alternative framing that shifts beyond these aggregations and specifications. In place of discrete sociological classifications of genders, ethnicities or social classes, new materialist, feminist and queer theorists have posited 'a thousand tiny sexes (Grosz 1993); a 'thousand tiny races' (Saldanha 2006); a thousand tiny disadvantages (Fox and Alldred 2021); and, consequently, a thousand (or is that a trillion?) tiny intersections (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2013), all constituted not by identity but by differences and becomings (Kimanthi et al. 2022, p. 3).

To further complicate this analysis, affect-economies will draw into assemblage not only human bodies, upon whose 'agency' scholarship on GRV has tended to focus, but also non-human matter (NHM). The post-anthropocentrism of a new materialist ontology of GRV requires that attention is also paid to this matter, acknowledging non-human affectivity as fully independent of human agency. NHM (for instance, alcohol, weapons, and seemingly innocuous material items or places) can establish important affects within episodes of violence. So, for example, a 'date-rape' assemblage might draw together two or more human bodes caught up in the rape itself, other human bodies encountered during the date (friends, taxi-driver, bartender, drug dealer) or subsequently (police, health professionals). But in addition, non-human matter including alcohol or drugs; a club, restaurant or other setting for the date; a location in which the rape took place; phones, condoms, and the complex and rhizomatic flows of affect between all these materialities are all constitutive of this gendered violence-assemblage (Fox and Bale 2017, p. 402; cf. Austin 2019, p. 169). A focus on the entirety of affect-economies in violence-assemblages requires that methodologically, these rhizomatic flows need to be unpicked. These methodological implications are discussed in the following section.

As noted earlier, the 'gender-based violence' (GBV) literature has focused almost exclusively upon 'violence against women', considering such violence as a gross manifestation of the 'historically unequal power relations between men and women' (United Nations 1993, p. 2). The monist ontology of the new materialisms offers a means to unpack further the relationship between gendered violence and these 'unequal power relations'—not only between men and women, but across the entire range of violence-assemblages encompassed by the broader term 'gender-related violence' (Alldred and David 2014, p. 15), and from physical to symbolic violences. This ontology focuses not upon 'structural' forces, but rather on the micropolitics of everyday life that in this monist ontology constitute the social world (Hook and Wolfe 2018, pp. 872–73). As discussed earlier, this 'flat' ontology cuts across sociological dualisms such as 'structure/agency' and 'micro/macro', to make sense of power and resistance as constituted in everyday interactions (Fox and Alldred 2018).

A monist ontology precludes 'explanations' of GRV through top-down or structuralist notions such as 'patriarchy', 'heteronormativity' or 'misogyny'. While not denying that the affects associated with these constructs are very real, the micropolitics of GRV are enacted at the level of the affective assemblages that make up daily life, while it is these structuralist 'explanations' that themselves need explaining (Latour 2005, p. 6). To return to Parkinson's (2019) study for a moment, she found widespread domestic violence following the Australian bush fires, with 17 out of 30 women reporting violence from, and 16 fearful of, their male partners. One woman, 'Lauren' suggested that her active community involvement after the fires had given her a new sense of personal value and self-confidence. Her husband had consequently increased his use of power and control in the relationship to counter her

new autonomy from him (Parkinson 2019, p. 2344). 'Virginia' and 'Kylie' reported that the stress of life after the fires had exacerbated the level of violence they suffered from their partners (Parkinson 2019, p. 2348), while 'Tanya' and 'Marcie' suggested that anxiety and frustration had led to anger and rage and consequent violence. Other women described how the fires had made them vulnerable through homelessness or unemployment, giving violent men from whom they had separated means to find ways back into their lives and continue the physical abuse (Parkinson 2019, p. 2349).

These examples reveal how violence emerges from complex affective flows in domestic situations, either as a last-ditch attempt by men to control or subordinate a partner, or as a swift line of flight beyond reasoned argument into a 'smoother space' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 423) of domestic domination. But it is in these myriad interactions that the subordination of women emerges, and has emerged over millennia, rather than from some unseen, top-down yet all-pervasive patriarchal social relation.

Rather than dooming the study of GRV to hand-wringing over the inexplicability or 'multiple causation' of gendered violence, a monist, non-structural ontology offers opportunities for insight based upon asking the incisive ethological question: what can a body do? As noted in the previous section, *violent affects re-distribute capacities within assemblages.* What is distinctive about GRV is that this shift is gendered and/or sexualised, either in terms of the genders or sexualities of the humans involved, or in terms of how the micropolitics of the violence-assemblage territorialise or aggregate bodies to shift or sustain the balance of power between genders or sexualities. Parkinson's (2019) study illustrates how–regardless of the immediate or indirect 'causes' of gendered violence, what violent affects *do* is enhance the capacities of one party within a violence-assemblage, while placing limits upon what another party can do.

Some caution is needed, however, before assuming that gendered violence is always affectively symmetrical: as one party's capacities increase, another's are constrained. Earlier in this section it was noted that violent affects are always caught up in complex assemblages, along with multiple non-violent affects. On occasions, these assemblages can shift capacities in unexpected ways. Hammers' (2019) detailed case-study documented how 'Ann', a survivor of child sexual abuse and rape, used 'rape-play' within a BDSM environment to re-enact and productively explore her trauma and the limits it had placed on what she could do (Hammers 2019, pp. 505–6). Key to this had been finding what Ann called 'the right top' (dominant partner), who she defined as 'someone who not only "suffers alongside you" but is also able to "use violence to take you to the very edge"' Following these rape re-enactments, Ann felt 'strengthened, renewed, and more confident', with a capacity to engage with the world in ways impossible to imagine previous to BDSM (Hammers 2019, pp. 506–7). Hammers (2019, p. 507) concluded that this novel form of therapy 'reassembles negative affect into productive possibility'. Within the specific violence-assemblage of this BDSM rape-play, the violent affect between Ann and the 'top'–when assembled alongside affects of trust and care–enhanced her capacities, supplying a becoming, a powerful line of flight from her trauma.

This latter study confirms that violence should be understood not as an isolated affect, but as always emerging from complex affective assemblages. Consequently, the outcomes of violence-assemblages in terms of bodily capacities are unpredictable and highly labile. That said, the relational, post-anthropocentric and monist ontology of GRV does suggest how patternings of gendered power and privilege are produced and reproduced within the assemblages of everyday living, as violent affects flow rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 505) through the spaces of the social world. The implications of this ontology are further considered in the concluding discussion.

6. A Note on GRV, New Materialism and Methodology

Methodologically, a new materialist approach departs significantly from a conventional approach to social data, as it needs to be relational, post-anthropocentric, monist and micropolitical, as opposed to essentialist, humanist, dualist and structural (Fox and

Alldred 2021). Indeed, there has been wide disagreement among new materialist scholars over the methodology and methods that might be applied when doing empirical new materialist research (Fox and Alldred 2021; St. Pierre 2021, p. 9). However, 'ethology' and its conceptual toolkit of affect, assemblage, capacities and micropolitics used so far in this paper to explore GRV translates easily toward sociological purposes. It has been applied successfully within the social sciences to inform methods of data collection and analysis that can capture the affective interactions between matter in assemblages and the capacities they produce (Fox 2005; Fox and Alldred 2017; Cluley et al. 2021; Coffey 2022; Dennis 2018; Duff 2014, 2016; McLeod 2014; Mulcahy and Martinussen 2022; Potts 2004).

Divergences from conventional social inquiry begin by setting an research question appropriately: enabling data to be collected that address affects, assemblages and the capacities of all matter (as opposed to a focus on human bodies and their capacities alone). A research question might thus take the violence-assemblage as its starting point, with the objective of exploring the range of affects and materialities that it comprises. For instance, a study of rape used as a weapon of war might ask: what are the micropolitics of sexual violence during military conflict?

Data collection methods selected to answer this question must be capable of accessing the relations, affects, capacities and micropolitics within the events to be studied. Any methods capable of gathering relevant data are appropriate. Humanist methods such as interviews, which are conventionally used to gather data on experiences, reflections or subject positions (Alldred and Gillies 2002), need to be repurposed to gain insider insights into the flows of affects in events and the capacities thus produced (Fox and Alldred 2021). Mixing methods may provide access to a wider range of affects. For instance, survey data among soldiers and civilians in a conflict zone might identify the humans and the non-human matter in specific assemblages in which sexual violence is used as a war tactic, while focused group interviews may supply detail on the physical, psychological, social and cultural capacities thus produced.

Data analysis is the aspect of research methodology which diverges most significantly from a humanist and essentialist approach (Fox and Alldred 2021). It needs to be able to reveal the human and non-human *matter* in assemblages; the *affects* that assemble them; and the *capacities* these affects produce. It also needs to provide insight into whether these affects enable or constrain what bodies or other non-human matter can do, for instance as a consequence of an act of GRV. These are the *micropolitics* of the events being studied. These four italicised concepts can be the basis for a coding frame that might be used in a qualitative analysis programme such as NVivo or Atlas. This coding frame can also be used to structure how the findings are written up for dissemination.

7. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper has been to establish a novel analysis of gender-related violence (GRV) informed entirely by the relational, post-anthropocentric and monist ontology of the new materialisms. The paper has described how this ontology of GRV diverges foundationally from humanist accounts in a number of ways:

- It re-focuses attention away from human bodies and on to more-than-human assemblages.
- In these assemblages, human agency is no longer the exclusive force making things happen. Instead, a post-anthropocentric flow of affects (capacities to affect or be affected) between human bodies and non-human matter together establish the capacities of these materialities. What bodies can do is always contingent upon the specific combinations of affects within a particular event (assemblage). Consequently, violence must be explored not as a manifestation of human agency acting on another human body, but as a more-than-human assemblage of affective materialities.
- Violence-assemblages incorporate both violent affects and a wider affect-economy that includes non-violent affects. This wider affect-economy shapes the capacities produced by a violent affect. For example, a domestic violence-assemblage may include affects

associated with cramped living spaces, lack of privacy, financial insecurity and so forth. GRV is distinct insofar as the violent affects involved either act upon already-gendered bodies (for instance in 'violence against women' or transphobic violence), or because these affects themselves gender bodies (for example, the binary categorisation of humans into male and female genders with specific roles or attributes).

- Like all affects, violent affects shift what bodies can do, and what they can become. Some becomings may be 'lines of flight' that shift a body out of constraints or limitations. However, violence-assemblages must always be considered relationally and micropolitically. A violent affect that supplies one party with a line of flight from a fraught social situation (such as the domestic violence-assemblage described in the previous bullet point) will typically constrain, subordinate or injure other bodies in assemblages, or sustain this subordination.
- The power imbalances produced and reproduced by GRV derive not from structural or systemic forces external to events, but by flows of affect endlessly coursing through the assemblages that constitute the social world from day to day.

Together, these ontological divergences have profound implications for understanding GRV. Foucault (1980, pp. 116–19) argued that the coercive power of violence has been superseded in the modern period by discipline and self-governance. However, the present analysis suggests that violence and threats of violence are indeed a potent 'technology of power' (Foucault 1988, p. 18). As such, they act alongside the kinds of bottom-up material-semiotic disciplinary and governmentality practices associated with gender and sexualities outlined in Foucault's work (see, for example, Foucault 1998, pp. 94–96), and the 'control society' that Deleuze (1992) argued is now replacing disciplinary organisations with a culture of endless monitoring, audit and assessment of every aspect of social life. As noted earlier, violent affects may be physical, psychological, sociocultural or what Bourdieu (1990, pp. 84–85) called symbolic violence. The latter category includes socially-prescribed gender roles, marriage and hegemonic monogamy, misogyny, heteronormativity and culturally-gendered rules of sexual behaviour; and men's everyday (physically non-violent) control and policing of women's behaviour (Morgan and Björkert 2006, pp. 444–45).

However, while Bourdieu regarded symbolic violence as structural (ibid: 445), the monism of the new materialisms treats conceptions of gendered violences such as patriarchy, misogyny, heteronormativity as produced and reproduced by a drip, drip, drip of gendered affects within the everyday assemblages that constitute the social world (Alldred and Fox 2015; Fox and Alldred 2017, 2018). For example, adolescent boys viewing violent pornography reproduces misogyny, sexual objectification and circumscribed sexualities day-by-day (Fox and Bale 2017, p. 405). This monist ontology suggests a fresh perspective upon the critical agenda of GRV concerning gender binarism, gender and sexual normativities (Missé 2022), and upon the multiplicitous intersectionalities between gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation (Alldred and David 2014, p. 15; Sundaram et al. 2019, pp. 4–5) within violence-assemblages.

According to this perspective, violence, including GRV, is much more widespread in daily life than might be assumed of a 'civilised' society (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p. 425). It is just that this is not simply the violence of the angry or frustrated man beating his partner or raping his male or female acquaintance; of physical or verbal abuse of people of non-normative sexualities in the street or social venue. Rather it is also the violence of gender aggregations that stem variously from culturally-unproblematised territorialising and aggregative norms (Gordo Lopez 1996, p. 176; Kimanthi et al. 2022; Missé 2022): of gender binarism, of gendered dual standards for sexual conduct, of monogamy and the Oedipalised nuclear family, of violent pornography, of headscarves, hijabs and summarily-closed girls' schools. All these affective flows in the gendered assemblages of everyday life produce and reproduce what has conventionally (that is, from a structuralist perspective) been understood as a pervasively patriarchal, misogynist, heteronormative, binarist and inequitable 'gender order' (Alldred and Biglia 2015, p. 662; Engel 2006; Ertürk 2009, p. 68 n. 2). However, what the new materialist approach offers is a shift away from top-down

structural 'explanations' toward exploration of the flows of affect throughout daily life that constitute the endemic gendered violence of contemporary society. These flows may be confronted by policy and activism where they are produced and reproduced: in the quotidian, more-than-human affects of social life.

So, for example, a new materialist perspective on GRV would offer a critical assessment of the decision by the Nottinghamshire (UK) police force to label some gendered acts of violence as 'misogyny hate crimes' (Mullany and Trickett 2020). This attribution, according to the Nottinghamshire force, addresses those acts by men committed against women 'simply because they are women'. In terms of the analysis developed here, the Nottinghamshire police force's approach–while well-intentioned–risks treating misogyny as an 'explanation' for some acts of GRV and not others (for instance, some acts of domestic violence, rape and sexual assaults). As Latour (2005, p. 6) suggests, this form of structuralist explanation actually explains nothing. Indeed, it may obscure the specific affective flows that constitute individual acts of GRV.

A new materialist focus suggests that alongside efforts by police and the criminal justice system to reduce incidents of GRV in the community and successfully prosecute offenders, there is a need to address the diverse affects in GRV-assemblages that produce and perpetuate its different manifestations. Findings from empirical studies applying the new materialist methodology outlined in the previous section can be used to inform initiatives to address GRV. In this particular example, this may include developing understanding–by first responders, police officers, media and welfare agencies, children and young people in sex and relationship education classes, as well as those caught up themselves in cycles of gendered violence–of the multiple material, social, economic, intersectional and other micropolitical affects that produce gendered violences (see, for example, Alldred and Fox 2017; Alldred and Phipps 2018; Fox and Alldred 2017; Renold and Ringrose 2017). GRV is ingrained in the fabric of daily life, and as such a social issue that is everybody's business.

Despite this critical assessment, our formulation of a new materialist perspective in this paper on GRV is not intended entirely to substitute for humanist and essentialist accounts. These latter approaches have detailed the physical, psychological and existential impacts of gendered violence both qualitatively and quantitatively, and revealed the florid injustices of domestic violence; rapes, sexual assaults and sexual harassment; and homo/bi/transphobic violence. Rather, this materialist analysis complements humanist accounts, and invites scholars to attend both theoretically and empirically to how the violences of everyday life are relational, more-than-human, and emergent features of the disparate assemblages that drip feed GRV into all our lives. Importantly, it also suggests how these assemblages may be confronted.

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Notes

[1] As observed floridly in punishments meted out to women and LGBTQ people breaching religious norms; witchcraft trials; rape as a tactic of war, but also as a consequence of unacknowledged social processes such as gender binarism (Alldred and David 2014, p. 33) and neo-liberalisation (Alldred and Phipps 2018, p. 16; Colpitts 2022, p. 152).

[2] An ethological ontology does not, however, favour the conclusion drawn by Austin (2019, p. 175) that non-human matter such as guns or cattle prods *compel* humans to violent action. Rather, human and non-human matter gain violent affective capacities when they assemble.

[3] Such a sociological analysis does not, of course, deny the legal and political issues associated with the perpetration of violence, but rather offers some valuable complexification and most importantly, insights into prevention (Austin 2019, p. 177).

[4] This micropolitics of violence is not always a zero-sum game. For instance, in BDSM (and other consensual violent encounters such as rugby matches, 'Fight Club'), all parties–whether dominant or submissive; master or slave–gain capacities in terms of pleasure, arousal, psychological well-being from the violence (Hammers 2019, pp. 501–2). Both restorative and retributive justice are efforts by a 'civilised' authority to acknowledge the suffering caused by violence, by means of punitive or disciplinary measures that aim to cancel out any enhanced capacities afforded to one party or another in a violence-assemblage. In this latter eventuality, no parties gain from the violence, though all may lose.

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