

## Introduction

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.1 (2019)**  
Special Issue ***Gendered Bodies in Transit: Between Vulnerability and Resistance***. Ed. **Manuela Coppola**  
and **Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** This special issue addresses contemporary representations of "vulnerable" bodies in transit in Anglophone literature and culture and explores their strategies of resistance. The use of the expression "bodies in transit" in this issue has to be understood both as a reference to the materiality of diasporic, exiled, migrating, trafficked bodies, and as an allusion to the metaphorical transition of these marginalized subjects from alienation to regeneration in multiple contexts. The interdisciplinary contributions in this special issue tackle vulnerability as a marginal(ized) and potentially enabling condition entailing the crossing of bodily, sexual, mental, ethical, cultural, and national borders. Ranging from literature to cinema, theatre and media, the articles address literary and cultural representations of historical, as well as racial, medical, and neo-liberal violence, in order to explore individual and collective forms of resilience emerging from vulnerability and marginalization.

## Manuela COPPOLA and Maria Isabel ROMERO-RUIZ

### Introduction

Vulnerability has emerged as a central category and, most certainly, as a ubiquitous term in the definition of the human in the last two decades (Ganteau 2). Any overview of the term will point out its applicability to the human condition, framing vulnerability as a defining paradigm of contemporary culture. The wide variety of applications of this term to fields as diverse as medicine and psychology to social ecology and political economy (Hirsch 338), also testifies to the interdisciplinary nature of this concept.

Moving away from the essential passivity of an articulation of the vulnerable, Judith Butler's recent theorization has proposed a new understanding of the inter-relation between vulnerability and resistance (Butler, "Rethinking" 12-27). In showing their own precarity, vulnerable bodies are in fact also resisting the very (social, economic, racial, etc.) powers that act on them. This concept is closely related to the notion of resilience as the capacity to undo or reverse impacts as a way to preserve the integrity of a society, system or self (Bracke 52-53). Although its definition may vary slightly depending on the discipline it is applied to, all approaches to resilience will include the notion of healthy, adaptive, or integrated positive functioning over time as a consequence of adversity and trauma.

With this theoretical background, this special issue tries to investigate, through a range of articles, the centrality of mechanisms of resistance and resilience in gendered bodies in transit in contemporary global Anglophone literatures and cultures. Vulnerability has been specifically addressed here as a marginal(ized) condition entailing the crossing of bodily, sexual, mental, ethical, cultural, and national borders. The use of the expression "bodies in transit" in this issue has to be understood both as a reference to the materiality of diasporic, exiled, migrating, trafficked bodies, and as an allusion to the metaphorical transition of these marginalized subjects from alienation to regeneration in multiple contexts. Rather than assuming the inevitability of such a trajectory, however, the unpredictable and non-linear paths experienced in the transition have also been contemplated, possibly complicating any straightforward narrative of healing.

Considering vulnerability not as a limit but as a potentially enabling condition that needs to be mobilized for the purpose of resistance (Butler), the issue has developed the exploration of individual and collective responses to traumas and marginalization in the context of comparative cultural studies, addressing literary and cultural representations of historical, as well as racial, medical, and neo-liberal violence, to investigate the ways in which the gendered body in transit responds to traumatic experiences. The articles have also proved that the traumatic experiences of bodies subject to various kinds of violence, exploitation and discrimination, can articulate forms of agency leading to the construction of new forms of subjectivity and community. Similarly, the complexity of the processes of regeneration and healing has enabled the possibility of re-opening the debate on issues of subversion and resilience of marginalized gender identities in their intersection with race, class, age, etc.

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The articles included in this issue are varied in their theoretical framework and in the cultural products that they analyze, but they all have in common their concern for precariousness as the paradigm of the human condition. Addressing the topic of contemporary violence, in *Horrorism* (2009), Cavarero analyzes some of its forms such as terrorism or war as conflicts that cause the deaths of people and the erasure of their identities. It is specifically by the violence against bodies, dismembered in war or terrorist attacks, that the identity and singularity of the victims fade away while that of the perpetrators remains (113).

Cavarero considers the vulnerability of the body as a permanent status of human beings (31). In the same fashion, Butler (*Precarious*) has described the vulnerability of the body in relation to the "Other" as exposed to violence on ethical, race and sexual grounds. As political individuals constantly engaged in power relations, our bodies are controlled and undone by others. Yet, minority groups are especially vulnerable and more exposed to violence. Following strict normative conceptions of race, gender and sexuality that define "human" in narrow, mainstream ways, those who do not conform to this definition can suffer exclusion and violence. Their lives are worthless and their recognition in the public sphere is negated; dissenting voices have always been vanished from the public arena, otherwise they would destabilize the nation and its foundation (Butler, *Precarious* 34-36).

Self-representation is the first step towards reclaiming one's own humanity and exploring the potential agency inherent in vulnerability. As Butler argues, "[...] those who gain representation,

especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed not regarded at all" (*Precarious* 147). By voicing the trauma and representing violence, subjects in fact interpellate their vulnerability and become able to articulate strategies of resistance, both individually and collectively.

In this sense, Linnie Blake argues for the necessity to reinforce a culture of memory, to give voice through popular culture to those marginalized and silenced by nations (4-7). By making a public complaint or accusation, those who have experienced trauma defy the perpetrator's attempt to silence and isolate them, and open the possibility of finding new allies. When others recognize and bear witness to the testimony of violence, they share the responsibility for the harm and for restoring justice. (Herman 89) By giving public voice to the experience of violence, we as readers/viewers become witnesses too under what Kaplan calls "vicarious trauma," that is, the empathy the witness experiences and the effects produced in him/her, and we are urged to contribute to the restoration and restitution of the victims (40-41).

It is true, as Kaplan says, that "trauma can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe" (19), but it is crucial to support a culture of forgiveness instead of victimhood and vengefulness, as the latter hinder reconciliation and healing. In this sense, the victims are engaged in a common process towards healing which consists of four stages: confrontation, mourning, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Urlic, Berger and Berman 196). However, two other forms of healing can be discerned in our contemporary horizon: resistance and resilience. In Butler's words, "we are first vulnerable and then overcome that vulnerability, at least provisionally, through acts of resistance" ("Rethinking" 12). These acts of resistance become essential to destabilize "those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice" and to criticize "those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities" (20).

By undoing the opposition between vulnerability and agency, Butler understands vulnerability as "part of the very practice of political resistance," mobilizing it "for the purpose of asserting existence, claiming the right to public space, equality" ("Rethinking" 26). The articles included in this special issue tackle contemporary representations of "vulnerable" bodies in Anglophone literature and culture and explore their strategies of resistance. Ranging from literature to cinema, theatre and media, the cultural texts analyzed here focus on different types of trauma and gender violence (including war, human trafficking, medicalization, slavery and neo-slavery), and on their responses to such violence through the articulation of possible forms of collective and individual forms of resilience emerging from vulnerability and marginalization.

In "Trauma, Ethics and the Body of War in Brittain, Borden and Bagnold," Carolina Sánchez addresses war trauma and vulnerability through three texts that, by deconstructing the rhetoric of masculinity and patriotism, suggest a "gendered intervention in the body politic" through ethics. In her analysis of the autobiographical accounts of Vera Brittain, Enid Borden, and Mary Bagnold recounting their experiences as voluntary nurses in the front during World War I, Sánchez argues that, as they engage with the extreme vulnerability of others' bodies, such precarious exposure triggers an ethical responsiveness shaped by relationality and commonality.

The article by Marilena Parlati, "Memory in T/Rubble.Tackling (Nuclear)Ruins," investigates the material and cultural aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki through Tony Harrison's documentary *The Shadow of Hiroshima* and Kazuo Ishiguro's early novels. By looking at the history of what she calls "an evasive amnesia, hidden behind repeated commemoration rites," Parlati argues that these works interpellate vulnerability through the "absolute permanence" of nuclear rubble and its phantasmatic traces.

Violent economies of exclusion and marginalization are also discussed in Andrea Ruthven's article, "Subverting Transnormativity: Rage and Resilience in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*." Far from being a celebration of self-realization or a mournful representation of trauma, Ruthven argues that this 2014 transgender narrative explores the possibility for a more open gender identity that rejects transnormativity and that "derives its resilience from its vulnerability as an unrecognizable social other."

Rocío Carrasco explores the representation of both marginal and artificial bodies as commodified and vulnerable bodies in what she defines as two "bioethics narratives." In "The Commodified Body and Post/In Human Subjectivities in Fears's *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) and Romanek's *Never Let Me Go* (2010)," the author relies on the notion of embodied subjectivity to argue that, by placing the spectators in a position of marginality, both movies enable the viewers to participate in the post/in human experience.

In "Trespassing Physical Boundaries: Transgression, Vulnerability and Resistance in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*," Paula Barba investigates the complex articulations of violence and trauma in Kane's first play. The author suggests that, by confronting gender-based trauma, Kane undoes the very premises of the patriarchal configuration of vulnerability. Once fully confronted and embraced by the protagonist, trauma thus turns vulnerability into a source of resistance and ethical responsibility towards others.

Elena Jaime similarly addresses the positive effects of embracing female vulnerability in her, "Motherhood, Vulnerability and Resistance in *The Elysium Testament* by Mary O'Donnell." The article focuses on the protagonist's projection of her own vulnerability onto her son, and on the ensuing sense of guilt deriving from his premature death. Jaime contends that the work of writing as well as psychoanalysis represent the beginning of the cathartic and redeeming process which will eventually lead the protagonist to a symbolic rebirth.

In her analysis of "Resilience as Re-Generation in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*," Beatriz Domínguez interrogates Atkinson's belief in women's ability to resist systemic gender violence. While Domínguez argues that in the novel "resilience results from the combination of embodied memory and emotional forgetting," she also recognizes that Atkinson concedes her protagonist an escape from gender violence only through the creative license of multiple deaths and rebirths which allow her to learn from her past mistakes, thus questioning the possibility of female resistance in real life.

Cinta Mesa examines Chilean-Canadian playwright and actress Carmen Aguirre's latest autobiographical novel to analyze Latina's vulnerability in relation to exile, emigration, gender violence and stereotypes. In "Vulnerability and Resistance in Carmen Aguirre's *Mexican Hooker#1*," Mesa argues that, as resilience is a testimony of her physical and psychological wounds, Aguirre's dramatized body and her performances become her way to resist the vulnerability of the Latina female exiled body and to give voice to both personal and collective trauma.

In "Sex Between Women and Indianness: Vulnerable Casted Bodies," Antonia Navarro offers a reading of the representation of non-heteronormative desire in Shobha Dé's popular bestseller novel *Strange Obsession* and Karan Razdan's Bollywood film *Girlfriend*. Navarro contends that both works depict homosexuality as an illness that contaminates Indian culture, exploiting a repertoire of misogynist and patriarchal stereotypes representing lesbian bodies as exotic and erotic commodities that endanger a patriarchal, heteronormative and mono-religious notion of Indianness.

In the closing article of this special issue, Maria Isabel Romero discusses a neo-Victorian fictionalization of Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," to suggest how, despite her extreme vulnerability, her racialized body eventually gains agency through spectrality. In "Chase Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003) and the Neo-Victorian: The Problematization of South-Africa and the Vulnerability and Resistance of the Black Other," Romero argues that in this fictionalization of Baartman's life, she comes to symbolize contemporary South-Africa's process of recovery and identity construction in a postcolonial era still fraught with the tensions deriving from colonial traumas.

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Maria Isabel Romero-Ruiz (University of Málaga, Spain) teaches in the fields of Social and Cultural History and Cultural Studies. Her research is focused on the social and cultural history of sexuality in Victorian England, although her interests have expanded to contemporary gender and sexual identity issues as well as post-colonial issues in Neo-Victorian fiction. She has edited and co-edited several volumes on migration, gender and identity and has published extensively in journals and books. She is also the author of an entry for the *Encyclopaedia of Global Human Migration* entitled "Trafficking, Sex-work and Migration" (Wiley Blackwell, 2013) and of the article "Gender Policy, the London Lock Asylum Committee (1836-1842) and the Asylum Regulations for 1840", *Atlantis (A Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, No. 2, December 2011). She has published the monograph *The London Lock Hospital in the Nineteenth Century: Gender, Sexuality and Social Reform* (Peter Lang, 2014). Her most recent publications are the co-editions of the volume *Victorianomania: Reimagining, Refashioning and Rewriting Victorian Literature and Culture* (Franco Angeli, 2015) and of the special issue of the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* entitled "(Neo)-Victorian Sexploitation" (2017, 9:2). Email: <mirr@uma.es>.