

Resilience as Regeneration in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

Beatriz Domínguez García
University of Huelva

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, **Purdue University Press** selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Domínguez García, Beatriz. "Resilience as Regeneration in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.1 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3378>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 21 Issue 1 (March 2019) Article 2
Beatriz Dominguez García,
"Resilience as Regeneration in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss1/2>>

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

Abstract: In *Life After Life* (2013), British writer Kate Atkinson returns to the rewriting of History as her-story that characterized her early fiction. The protagonist's lifespan overlaps with the major historical events of the twentieth century, allowing the writer to explore how those affected the individual lives of women and, at the same time, problematizing history, memory, and the past. Above all, *Life After Life* highlights the deep vulnerability of women to systemic gender violence, although it also emphasizes women's resilience. The purpose of this paper is to examine Atkinson's peculiar rendering of resilience, which interestingly she locates in the body, rather than in the mind. I contend that in *Life After Life* resilience results from the combination of embodied memory and emotional forgetting. The former—a kind of sixth sense that instinctively steers Ursula away from danger—facilitates women's survival, while the latter ensures the character's psychological welfare. My analysis also considers this novel and its protagonist as an important departure from Atkinson's earlier fiction, because the protagonist is given a way out. This power, however, comes at a cost, for in order to forget, first she needs to die. However, since rebirth is a creative license and patently impossible in real-life terms, Atkinson seems to establish the impossibility of victims to put an end to their own victimization and, likewise, the ability to "recover" from that bodily violence through its physical erasure. In this respect, one may wonder whether Atkinson is just questioning the ability of female victims to be resilient, whether resilience can be a viable discourse for recovering from gender violence and, finally, whether cultural texts can successfully present female resilience at all.

Beatriz Domínguez GARCÍA

Resilience as Regeneration in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

In her 2013 novel entitled *Life After Life*, Kate Atkinson has completely broken away from the blended-genre she made use of in her earlier detective fiction series, both regarding the detective formula itself and its protagonist. However, if Kate Atkinson had appropriated the detective genre with the Jackson Brodie's series to voice her concerns with memory, history and the archive, it seems to me that her 2013 novel, *Life After Life*, returns to her earlier concerns with the deep vulnerability of women to gender violence in a loose appropriation of the historical genre. Reviewing briefly her oeuvre, it can be stated that the uses of memory, recollections, official history, and the archive have been present in it since she published *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* in 1995. The protagonist of Atkinson's first novel needed objects to bring forward the family's past and their (un)lucky choices which set them to the forefront to rewrite both official history and the archive, on the one hand; and therapy to overcome the trauma of seeing her twin sister drowning, on the other. In contrast, Ursula Todd, the protagonist of *Life After Life*, needs to die a painful death to revisit all the places which have constructed women's cultural memorials as well as their constant victimization and gender abuse. To do so, the protagonist re-lives her life more than a dozen times and each time she can start afresh. My proposal here is to read Atkinson's novel as a conscious play with issues of genre and gender in the narrative throughout her narration of vulnerability, resistance, survival and/or resilience. To this purpose, I rely heavily on my own interpretation of the novel and my critical readings of Judith Butler's *Vulnerability in Resilience* (specifically Sarah Bracke's contribution), Paul Connerton's typology of forgetting and Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory*; other similar research on history, memory, gender and violence provides the foundation for my analysis.

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch affirms that "gender, as sexual difference, can fulfil a number of functions in the work of memory," and she goes on to explain:

It can serve as a figure that can mediate the ways in which certain images and certain narratives have been able to circulate in the culture of the postgeneration. In traumatic histories, gender can be invisible or hypervisible; it can make trauma unbearable or it can serve as a fetish that helps to shield us from its effects. It can offer a position through which memory can be transmitted within the family and beyond it, distinguishing mother-daughter transmission from that of fathers and daughters or fathers and sons, for example. It can offer a lens through which to read the domestic and the public scenes of memorial acts. And even when gender seems to be erased or invisible, feminist and queer readings can nevertheless illuminate not just what stories are told or forgotten, or what images are seen or suppressed, but how those stories are told and how those images are constructed. In its awareness of power as a central factor in the construction of the archive, moreover, feminist analysis can shift the frames of intelligibility so as to allow new experiences to emerge, experiences that have heretofore remained unspoken, or even unthought. (18)

In the same line of thought, when explaining the term "cultural countermemory" Christine Bold, Ric Knowles and Belinda Leach argue that

[T]hese sites have been seen to resist the suppression of public consciousness about the scope and extent of violence against women as an ongoing, everyday, systemic social fact. This suppression occurs through the treatment in the media and elsewhere of incidences of such violence as isolated, through ungendered circumlocutions such as "domestic violence," through a refusal to make connections among forms and representations of gendered violence across a broad spectrum of society, and through a kind of active societal forgetting. (125-26)

Thus, in the novel, Ursula is the victim of gender violence, yet her extraordinary capacity for rebirth allows her to start anew, and eventually to escape the specific aggressions of each previous life in the next, probably using fantasy to denounce violence. If we accept that resilience, following Marianne Hirsch, can be defined as "a form of suppleness and elasticity that enables adaptation to and recovery from shocks, surprises, and even slowly evolving changes and afflictions" ("Connective" 338), it could be contended that Atkinson's novel plays with standard notions of resistance, vulnerability and resilience by creating a medium in which rebirth and re-living can exist.

My second point of interest is Sarah Bracke's assertion, that "resilience is indeed frequently characterized as the ability of something or someone to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, or bent. It is understood as the capability of a *strained body* to recover its

size and shape after deformation caused by compressive stress. Resilience, in sum, revolves around shock absorption" (54, my italics).

In this sense, the protagonist of the novel has to endure all these pulling, stretching, pressing and bending to embrace her capacity for regeneration. However, it is not only bodily features that are needed to understand this character's ability to live "life after life." That is why my final point of interest is born out of the difficulties to categorize the type of forgetting that is crucial to the novel with any of the categories of Connerton's typology, which he summarizes as follows:

The different types of forgetting I have just passed in review have different agents as well as different functions and values. The agents of Types 1 and 2 (repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting) are states, governments or ruling parties, and, in the case of the art museum, the gallery's curators as bearers of western culture or a national or regional inflection of it. The agents of Types 3 and 4 (formation of new identity and structural amnesia) are more varied; they may be individuals, couples, families or kin groups. The agents of Type 5 (annulment, as a reaction to information overload) are both individuals and groups of various sizes (for example, families and large corporations) and societies and cultures as a whole. The agents of Type 6 (planned obsolescence) are the members of an entire system of economic production. The agent of Type 7 (humiliated silence) is not necessarily but most commonly civil society. (69-70)

With these three ideas in mind, the analysis that will follow is twofold. First, I will provide a brief overview of how memory, forgetting and history are used in the novel. Secondly, I will perform an analysis of gender violence in one of Ursula's lives, to show that in *Life After Life* resilience may result from the combination of embodied memory and emotional forgetting. The former—a kind of sixth sense that instinctively steers Ursula away from danger—facilitates women's survival. While the latter ensures the character's psychological welfare, as the need to forget is part of individual and social healing, so much so that forgetting constitutes a success rather than a failure in those cases (Connerton 34).

It seems to me that history plays a different role in this text when coupled with memory or, more properly, the lack of it. For two thirds of the story, Ursula Todd hardly remembers she has already lived the life she is living and what has happened to her in that previous life. It is towards the end of the story, after many instances in which intuition and *déjà-vu* are invoked, that she finally understands and masters her unique capacity to go back in time. Ursula Todd is "a witness" and as such she embraces death once more to try to set right what has gone wrong during the plot (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 458). The narrative's choice of words is clearly stressing the work of memory over history. It is her own past—played through her memories—what she is going to set right and by doing so, she is focused on trying to change the course of history.

Throughout the novel, the new lives she lives take her through the Great War in her childhood, on to the Second World War—in her youth—and the aftermath of both wars. In these subsequent lives Ursula lives in England and in Germany, she works for the civil service and meets the Führer, and she both, at some point, marries a German citizen and, in another life, stays single. My interest, however, resides in the role played by a *déjà-vu* feeling throughout the novel as the literary device that unites history, the past, and memory. As I mentioned before, it is not until the end of the novel that Ursula learns of her power to time-travel and for the most part, she has to believe in her intuition, in her feelings of *déjà-vu* to change the course of her life—and of the ones around her. It is interesting then, that to play with memory as a literary device, Atkinson has turned to its loss and replaced it with feelings and sensations:

The mound reminded Ursula of something, but what? Something familiar, yet nebulous and undefinable, no more than a shape in her brain. She was prone to these *sensations*, as if a memory was being tugged reluctantly out of its hiding place. She presumed it was the same for everyone. Then this *feeling* was replaced by fear, a shadow of a thrill too, the kind that came with a thunderstorm rolling in, or a sea fog creeping towards the shore. Hazard could be anywhere, in the clouds, the waves, the little yachts on the horizon, the man painting at his easel. She set off at a purposeful trot to take her fears to Sylvie and have them soothed. (441; my italics)

Thus, Ursula Todd lacks memories, yet her body sends her a warning through these feelings and sensations. It is this corporeality of memory, or the corporeality of the lack of memories, that gives the novel its shape. In this text, it is the body that remembers—at first—and, as a result, the body is set in a prominent position which usually belongs to the mind. Hence, rationality gives way to intuition, changing substantially how the mind relates to memories and the past. It would seem that this enormous twist also changes the logical conceptualization of resilience, as a working of the mind, vulnerability and resistance. This female character's survival through her story is strongly based on her acceptance of her

body's signals: "The words 'veal cutlets à la Russe' drifted sleepily through her brain. And then suddenly she was on her feet, her heart knocking in her chest, a sudden familiar but long-forgotten terror triggered—but by what? It was so at odds with the peaceful garden, the late-afternoon warmth on her face, Hattie, the cat, washing herself lazily on the sunny path" (Atkinson 235). This fragment from the novel highlights Atkinson's peculiar rendering of resilience, which interestingly is located in the body. Ursula's failure at this point to understand the messages her body is sending her is what incapacitates her to prevent the traumatic events that will position her as vulnerable. As Bracke asserts "understandings of femininity in terms of fragility and vulnerability are of course deeply shaped by relations of race, sexuality, and class" (67). In this sense, Ursula has to fight through several lives her classification as fragile and vulnerable in patriarchal terms to be able to present herself as a free agent denying the external features that would maintain her within the relations mentioned by Bracke.

However, notwithstanding her lack of memories, it seems evident that Ursula Todd represents history. It is a history of the minor players, according to Linda Hutcheon, those who were the center of the postmodern historical novel ("the non-combatants or the losers" [Hutcheon 51]). The story seems to rely formally on Hassan's "postmodern realism" or on a general understanding of "magic realism," or on "time-travel," as Ursula herself thinks (Atkinson 399) or on pseudo-historical romance. Thus, it seems that Atkinson belongs to that generation of British writers who move away from the exhausted forms of the postmodern into a generic limbo stated by Rudaityté in the following terms: "Metafiction, postmodernist experiment with narrative technique, attacks on mimetic referentiality, delight in popular culture became mainstream, they lost their subversive power and shock effect and no longer produce the effect of novelty; thus to reach alterity the postmodernist and modernist novel are deconstructed: old, pre-modern forms are used to achieve defamiliarization" (1).

Defamiliarization, following Rudaityté's idea, helps the writer—if not the reader—to understand and come to terms with the existence of truth, not in its pre-postmodern sense but in what Hassan has labelled as its post-postmodern sense. The death of the protagonist, in Atkinson's novel, could well represent this "death of truth" that traditional postmodernism advocates. However, this novel's protagonist's numerous re-births could well re-state the postmodern acceptance of the existence of multiple truths.

Yet, writing in the twenty-first century, Atkinson unites all the genres in an effort to group all of them together in what constitutes a movement away from the constraints of postmodernism: this character's life is not completely disrupted by her witnessing of the major events of history, nor is her life at the forefront of the personal history told. On the contrary, this character is allowed to go back and forth in time to try to make the disruption less far-reaching than expected, and that's why Ursula feels that "some of her future was also behind her" (Atkinson 175). It is obvious that Ursula Todd suffers in Nazi Germany, that she dies during the blitz, that she faces the loss of dear ones to the conflict, etc.; yet, by living "life after life" she is able to minimize the suffering and the loss. Before embarking on one of her last lives, Ursula Todd accepts that: "she was both warrior and shining spear. She was a sword glinting in the depths of night, a lance of light piercing the darkness" and states "there would be no mistakes this time" (Atkinson 458). This is the key to Ursula's capacity in that she embraces her unique form of corporeal memory as the locus where her resilience is placed to be able to change the past and at the same time, on a formal level, our understanding of history and fiction.

As a result, by accepting her power to change what has happened, Ursula becomes the resilient agent of her own survival and, at the same time, of those around her. Following Sarah Bracke's reading of resilience and power, it could be affirmed that,

Thus a resilient subject comes into being when an individual, directly or indirectly, feels or is made to feel that the moral code of resilience applies to her, and acts accordingly. As she increasingly accepts she ought to conduct herself in resilient manners, she might, for instance, turn to resources that advise her on building a resilient self. In this approach, the modality of power through which individuals transform themselves into the willing subjects of a moral discourse is the subject's agency. Agency thus refers to the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of actions, and these capacities and skills are acquired precisely through submitting to particular disciplines. (63)

Hence, Ursula's empowerment, her knowledge of her ability to "time-travel" and change the past, in this last life is the key to remembering and then to resilience. By accepting her power to change the past and avoid "mistakes this time," she becomes that "resilient" and "willing subject" who has the capacities and skills for empowerment.

Moreover, her continuous rebirth places the emphasis on her body's physicality and endless capabilities. It is the bodily inscription of both, memory and gender violence, where the text re/writes vulnerability and resistance. At the beginning, Ursula is unable to offer resistance to gender violence

because she places too much weight on memory and disregards her body's signals. However, her gradual maturation towards an understanding of her unique ability to re-live will make her able to offer this resistance. Atkinson is concerned with gender violence, as her oeuvre establishes and, accordingly, *Life After Life*, continues to find a solution or, at least, expose the dangers that women suffer. Gender violence is not only exerted on the protagonist. There are other women and girls who suffer from sexual abuse in the novel and female vulnerability is exemplified by several of the characters that appear in the novel. Yet none of them offer, as Ursula does, a path towards agency and empowerment and this is why it will be best to concentrate on the protagonist and how the gender violence she suffers, when resulting in death, allows her to start a new life in which she escapes the source of violence.

For instance, after being kissed on her sixteenth birthday, Ursula is raped by the same boy—a friend of his brother's—in her own home (Atkinson 185-86). The consequences of the rape are an unwanted pregnancy and an unsafe abortion that bring Ursula Todd close to death and, for the first time, rejected by it (188-94). However, her not telling what has happened establishes other—personal, social, and familial—consequences that Ursula regrets deeply. Right after being raped, Ursula Todd reflects:

A girl surely should know better than to be caught on those back stairs—or in the shrubbery—like the heroine in a gothic novel [...]. He must have sensed something in her, something unchaste, that even she was unaware of. Before locking it away she had gone over the incident again and again, trying to see in what way she had been to blame. There must be something written on her skin, in her face, that some people could read and others couldn't. Izzie had seen it. Something wicked this way comes. And the something was herself. (187)

This passage clearly illustrates female vulnerability to systemic gender violence. Ursula does not question received notions of female impurity rendering this one of the worst lives she must live. During the remainder of this life, Ursula Todd not only suffers her mother's rejection and her own self-loathing but, as I have mentioned above, also suffers death's rejection after the abortion, as in the following passage: "The hand of night was held out to her and Ursula rose to meet it. She was relieved, almost glad, she could feel the shining, luminous world beyond calling, the place where all the mysteries would be revealed. The darkness enveloped her, a velvet friend. Snow was in the air, as fine as talcum, as icy as the east wind on a baby's skin – but then Ursula fell back into the hospital bed, her hand rejected" (Atkinson 194).

In fact, she doubts the life she is living is worth living. The consequences for Ursula Todd follow swiftly. When she enrolls in a typing course, the teacher harasses her. When she leaves home, she becomes a heavy drinker. When she finally finds someone to share her life with, it turns into a nightmare of domestic violence, which only stops when her husband kills her, ending the cycle of violence by bringing back death and therefore a new beginning.

This domestic violence brings together the social/public and the domestic/private sphere. The protagonist's mother's rejection of her daughter makes Ursula Todd's available choices for the future scarce, as it is Sylvie the one in charge of her daughter's future. In this respect, Ursula is no longer to graduate or attend college and, accepting Sylvie's authority over her, she will no longer be able to go back home. It is Sylvie who is in charge of reminding not only Ursula but also the reader of the prominent position her virtue deserves. Sylvie functions here as agent of patriarchal order, blaming the daughter for losing it, and thus her reaction clearly mirrors society's wider reaction to the loss of virginity. The mother's patriarchal role is enacted even more obviously during Ursula's wedding day when it is Sylvie who undertakes questioning Ursula Todd's intention regarding the wedding night and voices all patriarchal concerns about a woman's purity and innocence:

'And does Derek know you're not intact?' Sylvie asked [...]
'Intact?' Ursula echoed, staring at Sylvie in the mirror. What did that mean, that she was flawed? Or broken?
'One's maidenhood,' Sylvie said. 'Deflowering,' she added impatiently when she saw Ursula's blank expression. 'For someone who is far from innocent you seem remarkably naïve.'
Sylvie used to love me, Ursula thought. And now she didn't. 'Intact,' Ursula repeated again. She had never even considered this question. 'How will he tell?'
The blood, of course.' Sylvie said, rather testily. (Atkinson 211)

In just a few exchanges, Ursula has lost any claim to autonomy or personal identity because of the "flaw" in her body, thus she is being socially judged by a bodily trait, her (lack of) "maidenhood." In this exchange, her body becomes invisible, because of the "flaw," and at the same time, too visible thanks to it. Moreover, it could be questioned whether death's rejection in the clinic is not an echo of Sylvie's. The patriarchal appropriation of Ursula Todd's body, and its subsequent rejection of it through

her mother's and death rejection, becomes the weapon which destroys Ursula Todd's autonomy and convinces her of her own wickedness. As before, Ursula is forced to lose her available options and the necessary tools to change how she perceives herself and how others define her. Her vulnerability and incapability to defend herself during the rape scene is used to change her role of victim to the one of passive perpetrator and, in the world represented by her mother, has caused her to lose her position and worth.

In this respect, Ursula Todd is forced to be personally and socially disempowered. Her physical loss, as Sylvie states, imposes in her a lack of power which reflects a society that relies heavily on women's chastity. Following Chris Bricknell's review of the relationship between power and sexuality, Ursula Todd could be presented as a disempowered female in several arenas. Not only her entry into sexuality disempowered her personally, but also socially and within her family, since her status, her definition as a woman is found lacking. As Bricknell states:

Regulatory and definitional power often go hand in hand. Regulation—in the sense I use it here—incorporates dense networks of definitions and norms, but extends its reach far beyond their borders. This dimension of power circulates from and emanates within the broadest social climate, and it involves the ability to enforce the norms and definitions explored so far. The agents of regulation are multiple, and their effects and interrelationships have generated a considerable contemporary and historical literature. These include the state, religion and medicine. (60)

Ursula Todd's body, which has been regulated by at least two of the powers Bricknell mentions—namely, the social climate, and the medical one—dictates her identity and her capacity for agency in her gradual belief in what her mother, Sylvie, has told her. While reflecting on the life she is currently living, she finally has got convinced that what has happened to her, the rape, the pregnancy, the abortion, seems "to have put paid to anything grander" (Atkinson 204). Thus, gender violence and gender inequality make this life, like the lives of other female characters in the novel, an example of that female vulnerability that portrays the impossibility of moving away from the straitjackets of gender abuse, and how this impossibility is accompanied by an unequal definition of female autonomy which still resides in its corporeality. In this life, rejected by death after the abortion, Ursula enters a cycle of vulnerability that prevents her movement towards what Bracke has termed a "resilient subject."

Considering how gender crimes are the only ones in which the blame is placed on the victim instead of the perpetrator, it seems evident that by finally accepting this imposed blame for her own defiling, Ursula Todd's body has been "disciplined" in Foucauldian terms, and her agency taken away. Her own doubts about herself—as is evident when she muses that "there must be something written on her skin, in her face, that some people could read and others couldn't. Izzie had seen it. Something wicked this way comes. And the something was herself" (Atkinson 187). This gradually break her and make her an easy prey for the violence to come in this life. Thus, as a consequence, this surprising female docile mind takes over her body's agency, autonomy and empowerment. It may be affirmed that, by portraying these situations in this novel, as well as in most of the others, Atkinson is trying to state how female agency and empowerment are still inscribed in the mind *through* the definitions of the female body. The corporeality of this definition is threatened, life after life, by the choices that Ursula Todd makes. When being killed by her husband ends this life (after trying to escape her fate), Ursula Todd's next one is lived in preventing any male advances by "becoming the sensible sort" (241). This time, it needs to be mentioned, though, she correctly senses the danger ahead, and reclaims possession of her body and self—becomes resilient, empowered—at the mention of the word "rape":

'I just wanted a kiss,' Howie said, sounding absurdly hurt. 'It wasn't like I was trying to *rape* you or anything.' The brutal word hung in the chilly air. Ursula might have blushed, should have blushed at the word but she felt a certain possession of it. She sensed it was what boys like Howie did to girls like Ursula. All girls, especially those celebrating their sixteenth birthdays, had to be cautious when walking through the dark, wild wood. Or, in this case, the shrubbery at the bottom of Fox Corner's garden. (231)

By reclaiming possession of the word "rape" Ursula gets empowered in a way that prevents sexual abuse in subsequent lives; besides, by running away from Derek, she stops the events that have just made her die. No longer playing by the patriarchal rules that establish female behavior as the key for gender abuse, Ursula is able to turn upside down her objectification by these men. As a matter of fact, it will take Ursula a couple of lives more to prevent any further sexual abuse in her narrative. Once Ursula accepts her ability to change the past, her encounter with Howie—the rapist—and Derek—the abusive husband—goes completely differently. Hereafter, by stopping Howie's rape, Ursula Todd is empowered in a way that enables her to also prevent the emotional breakdown that had made her a

"cog" instead of a something "grander" (Atkinson 204) and had transformed her into a "drinker" who had thrown herself into Derek's arms in search of safety and security.

Reclaiming possession of the word "rape," which emphasizes her willingness not to be held responsible of her fate, empowers the protagonist of the novel in the same way that accepting her capacity to "time-travel" does. It seems clear, I hope, how the novel plays with history and memory, gender and sexuality to work towards a problematization of how complex resilient subjects operate. Throughout the novel Ursula fights her classification as vulnerable as a direct consequence of her female gender. Unable to truly change the chain of events which establish her vulnerability in the story, her life has to end once and again "to set things right" in her own view and not in society's, because "practice makes perfect" (Atkinson 468). Furthermore, her inability to remember, at the beginning of the novel, makes impossible for her to reach resilience. So, her initial disregard for her body memories and her focus on standard modes of remembering bring death at least eighteen times in the narrative. In this sense, Ursula's vulnerability is continuously portrayed as a never-ending account of the ways human beings, and especially women, cannot escape precariousness in a social landscape where they are seen as victims.

As I have mentioned before, the moment Ursula is aware of her own power to come back, her vulnerable body and mind seem to become stronger and capable of facing the events that could endanger her. As a consequence, and for the first time, she embraces death to right what she feels are wrong turns (Atkinson 458). This empowerment—which results from the acceptance of both sites of memory within her: her body and, now, her mind—is what the writer offers, it could be discussed, as a resilient resistance to violence. Thus, there is a type of forgetting that needs to be defined to accommodate the continuous repetition of similar events that allow for victimization and vulnerability. As Bracke states: "Secure selves and secure societies, sovereignty and mastery, are not fantasies to which most populations are entitled. Yet these populations are often precisely the ones who are so readily labelled as 'resilient', which in this context aligns not with security but with survival" (59-60).

Ursula's role in the narrative clearly illustrates how she can be used as an example here. Her constant focus on her own survival throughout the novel makes her "resilience" equivalent with survival in Bracke's sense. Moreover, Atkinson introduces us into a reworking of fiction in which history, memory, gender and sexuality are placed within a female body to play with the genre limitations which Rudaityté mentions when stating that "the current processes in literary culture undoubtedly invite reconsideration and reconceptualization of such key notions as "truth," meaning production, textuality and literary interpretation" (2). As a consequence, Ursula Todd's personal historical pasts destabilize the conventions of the genre, as stated by Rudaityté, by the multiple bodies she inhabits.

Moreover, Atkinson's exposure of gender inequalities and of the consequences they have for women's agency and empowerment also destabilizes the generic conventions of the postmodern (Rudaityté 1-2). By subverting once more the order of time, the cause-effect law of physics and the body, her narrative exposes altogether the inability of society to put an end or to prevent gender and sexual abuse. To suffer gender violence, social violence, structural violence cannot be circumvented. To travel through time cannot happen. However, for Atkinson's latest protagonist, the only method to stop the never-ending cycle of violence entails re-living her life once and again in a new body until she does "get it right," as her brother Teddy stated, "exhausting" as it may be (Atkinson 405). In fact, her multiple lives and bodies should be read in light of Judith Butler's affirmation that:

Once groups are marked as "vulnerable" within human rights discourse or legal regimes, those groups become reified as definitionally "vulnerable," fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency. All the power belongs to the state and international institutions that are now supposed to offer them protection and advocacy. Such moves tend to underestimate, or actively efface, modes of political agency and resistance that emerge within so-called vulnerable populations. (24-25)

By ending in each life Ursula's vulnerability to gender violence, Atkinson offers her own view of the complexity of the issues analyzed here. Neither resilience nor vulnerability, she seems to contend, are the solution to the problematic issues of gender violence and forgetfulness. Furthermore, given the impossibility of re-living one's life, precarity is still at the center of female powerlessness. As such, Ursula travels through history and her own past to convey the necessity of external powers to re-structure conventional definitions of vulnerability. In this respect, feminist redefinition of victimization, if taken into account, could facilitate the appropriate use of those "modes of political agency and resistance" that Butler mentions. Likewise, Ursula's fight to recover her own agency by erasing external definitions of her femininity (after the rape and the abusive marriage) seems to appear as a conscious effort on the part of the author to show the extent to which placing blame on the victim of gender abuse

maintains and reinforces categorizations of vulnerability in the female population. All in all, *Life After Life* explores whether resilience is not just another element reinforcing the inability, or unwillingness, of society to work towards gender equality.

Note

The authors wish to acknowledge the funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Research Project "Bodies in Transit 2," ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) and the European Regional Development Fund for the writing of this essay.

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Kate. *Life After Life*. Doubleday, 2013.
- Bracke, Sarah, "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience". *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti & Leticia Sabsay, Duke UP, 2016, pp. 52-75.
- Bold, Christine, Ric Knowles and Belinda Leach. "Feminist Memorializing and Cultural Counteremory: The Case of Marianne's Park". *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2002, pp. 125-48.
- Brickell, Chris. "Sexuality and the Dimensions of Power". *Sexuality and Culture*, vol. 13, 2009, pp. 57-74.
- Butler, Judith. "Rethinking Vulnerability in Resistance". *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti & Leticia Sabsay, Duke UP, 2016, pp. 12-27.
- Connerton, Paul. "Seven Types of Forgetting". *Memory Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 59-71.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia UP, 2012.
- . "Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times". *PMLA*, vol. 129, no. 3, 2014, 338.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1989.
- Rudaitytė, Regina. *Postmodernism and After: Visions and Revisions*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.

Author's profile: Dr. Beatriz Domínguez García works as a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Huelva. She researches generic fiction and popular culture within feminist criticism and is currently participating in a funded research project entitled "Bodies in Transit 2: Mobilities, Genders, Interdependencies" (ref. FFI2017-84555-C2-1-P) continuing the line of work opened up in "Bodies in Transit" (ref. FFI2013-47789-C2-1-P). She is the author of the monograph *Hadas y brujas en la literatura contemporánea en lengua inglesa*, (1999) and has co-edited three collections of essays (2004, 2011 and 2015). She has also published papers in collections on feminism and popular culture as well as in the special issue of *RCEI* on "Bodies on [Dis]Play: Female Corporealities in Contemporary Culture" (2016). E-mail: beatriz.dominguez@dfing.uhu.es