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Embodied Vulnerabilities in Literature and Film

Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Miriam Fernández-Santiago (eds.)

New York: Routledge, 2024. 209 pp

ISBN: 978-1-03-226844-6

The volume *Embodied Vulnerabilities in Literature and Film*, edited by Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Miriam Fernández-Santiago, is a collection of essays that serves as an essential companion to their previous volume, *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature* (2023). In this new book, Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) works again as a pivotal theoretical approach for the very diverse topics and texts analysed in this collection. This time, however, the contributions focus on how vulnerability can be understood through different forms of embodiment across varied languages, genres, cultures, disciplines and subjectivities underlining a multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approach to vulnerability. All the contributions to the volume succeed in problematising traditional assumptions about the vulnerable body, showing instead the potential of literature and film and their "vantage position" (13) to engage in a critical discussion between an aesthetic production and representation of vulnerable bodies, and a reception and understanding of vulnerability that can trigger an ethical and sociopolitical involvement.

The volume is divided into twelve main chapters that are preceded by an introduction and a preface. The preface, written by David T. Mitchell, serves to relate the aforementioned Butlerian notion of precarity with vulnerable embodiments, which according to Mitchell, are "precarity's product" (xv). From this preface onwards, it is clear that all the contributions to the volume distance from the victimisation and passivity often attributed to vulnerable bodies.

The introduction, written by the editors, provides the theoretical point of departure of the collection. The authors brilliantly summarise and revise the main theories around the notion of vulnerability in varied fields of research, especially endorsing those of the last decades that problematise a reductive and exclusively negative view of vulnerability. They approach the semantic complexity of the notion and examine contexts where efforts to address vulnerability are directed to ameliorate or erase vulnerability by aiming at—often unattainable—ideals of normalcy, agency and equality. Instead, the authors propose “a qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility” (8) that “reconciles the apparently opposed binary categories traditionally associated with vulnerability, allowing individuals to be simultaneously and diachronically vulnerable and autonomous, or both weak and strong, by overlapping categories that are never mutually exclusive, but complementary” (10). In this way, the experience of embodied vulnerability is portrayed as fluid, interconnected, porous and multidirectional, “a meaningful exchange” (9).

In the first chapter, Maria Grajdan explores what she coins “*masculinity of vulnerability*” (18; italics in the original) in the all-female Japanese musical theatre Takarakuza Revue. Using a rigorous ethnographical approach, Grajdan observes a recent shift in the last five to seven years of performances where the otokoyaku, female actors who perform male roles, have served to reorient established ideals of masculinity connected to self-sufficiency towards a more vulnerable masculine model.

Marta Miquel-Baldellou continues with an engaging chapter that explores embodied vulnerability in the ageing woman actor by analysing the protagonists of Billy Wilder’s films *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Fedora* (1978). The author relies on Jean-Michel Ganteau’s notion of textual performativity of vulnerability (2015) together with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance (1990) to reflect on how the films and main characters’ performance of vulnerability both endorse and reject traditional discourses on ageing and gender.

In chapter three, Miriam Borham-Puyal analyses Ashley Smith’s autobiographical story *Unlikely Angel* (2005) and its film adaptation, *Captive* (2015), as examples of narratives of vulnerability that demonstrate the ambivalence of the notion in connection to motherhood. The author provides insightful views on the experience of motherhood as a site for precarity, but also a tool for resistance, connection and human recognition.

Chapter four continues with this approach of vulnerability as a potential catalyst for resistance by using Chloé Zhao’s portrayal of Lakota children in the film *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015). Andrés Buesa illustrates how “audiences are given the chance to embrace the potential of human vulnerability through the eyes of a child” (73). Using a well-informed framework of theories on spectatorship and ethics, Buesa demonstrates how despite the partially limiting depiction of the Native American experience, the embodied vulnerability of children in the film can impact viewers’ ethical and emphatic engagement.

Susana Nicolás Román also explores how embodied vulnerabilities can demand action from audiences. She demonstrates so in the fifth chapter of the collection, by offering a persuasive analysis of gendered vulnerability in the plays *In the Pipeline* (2010) and *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) by Gary Owen. According to Nicolás Román, these Welsh plays present characters that embody a “gendered precariat” (89), and who by embodying precarity and vulnerability, demand action, responsibility, and the need to restructure social norms of cohabitation.

In chapter six, Nicholas Hauck offers the first approach to poetry in the volume. He draws on Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of language (1974) and shared vulnerability (2010) to analyse examples of poetry that clearly expose an experience of embodied vulnerability, what he calls “*a poetics of vulnerability*” (93; italics in the original). By analysing the contemporary works of the French poets Stéphane Bouquet and Marie-Claire Bancquart, Hauck suggests how poetic language fosters a vulnerability that involves awareness about marginalisation, the fragility of the body, the closeness of death and our opening toward human and nonhuman others.

Paula Barba Guerrero’s rigorous analysis of Yaa Gyasi’s novel *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) shapes the seventh chapter. Using affect theory, she focuses on the mother-daughter bond to explore how migrant vulnerability intertwines with notions of racism, illness, grief, marginalisation, and mental illness. At the same time, the author shows how vulnerability can work as a potential reorientation towards aesthetic and ethical encounters with alterity, fostering a more rightful political intervention.

In chapter eight, Ana Chapman explores the problematic transhumanist promise of invulnerability by analysing representations of mental conditions in the TV series *Maniac* (2018). In the quest for human perfection, this dystopian series shows how technology tries to erase human vulnerability. However, as Chapman evinces, the result hinders the possibility of human interconnection, portraying how characters are emotionally and socially alienated, and therefore, newly vulnerable. In this way, according to Chapman, *Maniac* serves to portray vulnerability as “inherent to human essence” (128).

Chapter nine turns again to poetry to analyse Madeline Bassnett’s autobiographical collection *Under the Gamma Camera* (2019). Leonor María Martínez Serrano examines Bassnett’s first-hand experiences with cancer revealing the extreme fragility, materiality, and finite existence of human bodies. Martínez Serrano effectively illustrates that despite the radical experience of pain and suffering that Bassnett’s poems show, vulnerable experiences can be of use to heighten our awareness of a shared vulnerability with others and the natural world.

In the tenth chapter, McKew Devitt uses a corpus of four works that problematise the traditional misrepresentation of the rural depopulated Spain. He uses two novels: Lara Moreno’s *Por si se va la luz* (2013) and Alberto Olmos’ *Alabanza* (2024), as well as two memoirs: Sergio del Molino’s *La España vacía* (2016) and María Sánchez’s *Tierra de mujeres* (2019). Devitt

convincingly demonstrates that these narratives call for an urgent reexamination of how this crisis is often conceived and addressed in Spain, frequently leading to marginalisation, silencing or homogenisation of these regions and their inhabitants.

Chapter eleven also explores vulnerable populations, by addressing the representation of undocumented immigrants in the US in Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor* (2007). Luisa María González Rodríguez discusses how vulnerability is portrayed in the film both as dependant on sociopolitical policies and asymmetries of power as well as an existential condition intertwined with ideas of agency, and relationality. González Rodríguez asserts that the film prompts audiences to rethink their ethical approach to people at risk of exclusion.

The last chapter explores the conceptualisation of vulnerability as resistance (Butler et al. 2016) through the first-person accounts of refugees and asylum seekers in the auto-documentaries *#Myescape* (2016), *Chauka Please Tells Us the Time* (2017), and *Midnight Traveler* (2019). Beatriz Pérez Zapata and Víctor Navarro-Remesal present a comprehensive analysis of these documentaries, asserting that, recorded by using smartphones, they capture vulnerability both in content and form, by giving voice to their protagonists' vulnerable experiences at the same time they aesthetically portray the inherent vulnerability in the process of filmmaking itself.

The volume *Embodied Vulnerabilities in Literature and Film* certainly stands out as a compelling contribution in various fields. As shown here, the collection offers a rich tapestry of approaches that test the potential of vulnerability across widely varied genres, nationalities, languages, disciplines, methodologies, media, embodiments, and subjectivities. This impressive scope of analysis within the collection may have made it difficult, at times, to follow a more coherent organisation of chapters. While there is an evident endeavour to underline connections among the diverse contributions, the inherent breadth of the volume may confuse readers who expect a more distinct division in structure, more aligned with the forms of expression implied by the title: literature and film. Given that the volume begins with a foreword, an afterword could have further rounded out the collection even more, providing a more satisfying closure that could highlight the relevance and impact of this ground-breaking book as a whole. This volume is an exceptionally well-researched study that will be of interest to both experts and general readers interested in the notion of vulnerability or any of its multiple manifestations. This engaging and thorough collection manages to reexamine the notion of vulnerability in new a light, positioning the concept at the forefront of contemporary life.



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