Embodied VulnerAbilities in Literature and Film

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Introduction: The Manifold Corporealities of Vulnerability

Rather than meeting the expectations of economic progress, social equality, and environmental justice that the end of the 20th century held for the new millennium, the beginning of the following century stroke the global population with a succession of intersecting forms of embodied vulnerability like international terrorism, an economic crisis, a pandemic, digital monopolization, political radicalization, an energy crisis, a food crisis, and millions of displaced war refugees. The scenario of globalization now exacerbates the modalities of embodied vulnerabilities it promised to avoid in the first place because their intersections provide a revealing instantiation of the closely knitted relationship between bodily ontologies of subject emergence within social relations—i.e., the ethical and political implications it holds—as a vulnerAble one. Moreover, they set the ground to reflect on the availability of otherness not only on sociopolitical dimensions but also within the individual.

In 2018, Estelle Ferrarese made a comprehensive review of the critical trends and academic perspectives developing a construed notion of vulnerability in western cultures since the 1990s, with a special emphasis on the different versions of contractualism that condition the political on eliminating, containing, or forgetting the vulnerability of individuals (7–11). In this sense, Judith Butler (2004) contends that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (20) and goes further to address both social and political dimensions as *public*: "the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency […]. Although we struggle for rights over own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever our own. The body has its invariably public dimension" (26). In line with Butler and from the field of disability studies, Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko (2009) also affirm that "our bodies are not asocial

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since the social organizes even what can be understood as impairment, lack, defect, or bodily function" (10). Hence, the entanglement of bodies within the public dimension seems to run deeper than perceived on first looking. In such entanglement, Butler focuses on the relationality that shapes subjectification processes when she enquires

> [i]s there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another?
>
> (27)

Her answer to the question describes relationality "not only as a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence" (27). Therefore, in the wake of the so-called *ethical turn* and concomitant to the notion of vulnerability, Butler helped set the grounds of an ethics of vulnerability according to which individual forms of vulnerability generate ethical obligations in the whole of humanity. For over 30 years, vulnerability has continued to be the object of academic attention on many intersecting fields, enriching as well as problematizing its definition for literary analysis and cultural enquiry. Nowadays, research on vulnerability emerging from STEM areas, such as the biomedical sciences, civil engineering, or sustainability, is furthered in STEAM.[1] Simply within the realm of the humanities, publications attest to a philosophical consideration of vulnerability from the lens of ethical demand and response—many of which emerge from the field of feminism—(Gilson 2014; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014; Murphy 2011) and from political philosophy (Butler 2004, 2005, 2009; Ferrarese 2018; Fineman 2008, 2021). The disciplines of literary and cultural studies have also begun to explore the representation of vulnerabilities in literary and cultural products, with a view of how their aesthetic proposals interact with their ethical implications (Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández 2023; Ganteau 2015, 2023; Ganteau and Onega 2017; Onega and Ganteau 2023).

Reflecting on the Theoretical Configuration of Vulnerability

As definitions of vulnerability proliferate in an increasing effort for greater accuracy, differential pairs continue to be employed. These apparently irresolvable binaries shed new light on the nuances of the term that complicate effective social response to the demands of the vulnerable. Some of the salient binaries discussed in vulnerability research is the tension

between the universal nature of vulnerability and whether this is an ontological feature of life—i.e., shared by all (non)human beings (Fineman 2021)—and its context-specific manifestations (Brown 2022; Cole 2016) and whether vulnerability should be considered a condition (Gilson 2011, 2014) instead of a (non)human ontology.

Etymologically, the term *vulnerability* recalls a *wound* (*vulner*,*–eris* in Latin)—a key term in trauma studies—alongside *–ability*, i.e., agency that can be expressed in forms of resilience (Bracke 2016; O'Brien 2017) and/or resistance (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016) in contrast to passivity, victimhood, and lack of sovereignty, concepts to which vulnerability has traditionally been associated. In fact, these complex definitions regard vulnerability either as detrimental—with a greater focus on the *vulner-*—because it causes social exclusion—or as desirable—with emphasis placed on the prospect of *-ability*—due to the opportunities it provides to foster social cohesion based on interdependence. Surprisingly, the two morphemes in the term *vulnerAbility* irredeemably enact the ongoing binary appreciation of the concept perpetuated in its theoretical exploration. In this line, Erinn Gilson (2011) comments on the term "vulner*ability*" by defining it as "not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (310; emphasis in the original). This ambivalent relationship is closely related to Margrit Shildrick's (2002) understanding of vulnerability as "an inalienable condition of becoming" (85) in which such interdependence enables subjectification processes. Specifically, Shildrick defines vulnerability as "an existential state that may belong to any one of us, but which is characterised nonetheless as a negative attribute, a failure of self-protection, that opens the self to the potential of harm" (1). This potentially transformative condition can lead into two opposing responses, as Adriana Cavarero (2009) points out: those of "wounding and caring," alternatives to which "the singular body is irremediably open" (20). Simone Drichel (2013) also acknowledges received notions of vulnerability as "an unequivocal threat" in which "the experience of vulnerability therefore leads to efforts to transform openness into closure by creating and protecting proper—impermeable—boundaries" (5). Drichel compares the responses given to experiences of helplessness and vulnerability: in a vulnerable situation—that in which a need is revealed—the anxiety produced by exposing one's feeling or need to others induces a hurried response to shield against such anxiety, rather than a response to alleviate said feeling or need. This response often takes recourse to violence against the other so as to avoid unwanted anxious exposure. Butler (2005) even qualifies this response as inhuman when stating that "one seeks to preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other, but if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would become

inhuman" (103). The contours of the human ontology and the delineation of particular interdependencies with otherness in the form of disabilities, oppression, illness, discrimination, or other vulnerabilities thus continue to receive due critical attention.

Early on before Butler's (2009) classification between *precariousness* and *precarity*, she already pointed at this conceptual distinction from the frame of vulnerability. The kernel of precariousness can be identified in the following: "we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere we cannot preempt" (2004, 29). In turn, Butler defined another face of vulnerability in terms that readily remind one of precarity as follows: "This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (29). Thus, Butler's (2004, 2005, 2009) protean theorization of vulnerability distinguishes between precariousness and precarity, mirroring vulnerability's twofold nature: on the one hand, precariousness echoes the sense of a shared—read universal—embodied exposure consisting of our dependence on others; on the other hand, precarity denotes a contextual specificity as a spatio-temporal occurrence that is politically induced and differentially enacted.

From the field of economy, Guy Standing (2011, 2012) made well known the notion of the *precariat*,[2] a neologism which coined together the words *precarity* and *proletariat* to identify a global social class mostly extended in first-world nations that fruitfully intersected with the existing categories of race, gender, age, literacy, religious confession, cultural differences, or disability, among others. In this sense, Ferrarese (2018) has noticed that "[v]ulnerability becomes a zone for a cartography [...involving] strong susceptibilities whose intersecting with one another determines this 'zone' " (20). Standing (2011) describes the precariat "not as a class-for-itself, partly because it is at war with itself" (25). His description of the precariat is based on the recognition of a social dynamic whereby this class turns against its own members in an autoimmune response: "One group in it may blame another for its vulnerability and indignity" (25). The precariat, Standing argues, is formed mostly by denizens, i.e., individuals with a limited number of rights, instead of citizens. By the term *denizens*, he refers to migrants with professional qualifications who are not allowed practice; women who are subject to recency of practice policies; groups who suffer from a lack of cultural rights (Roma peoples, for instance); and those other groups who lack state (social) benefits. Standing concludes that "[t]his combination conjures up an image of a lonely crowd. And it is a mass phenomenon" (2012, 591), throwing before readers' eyes a portrait of heightened vulnerability simply because, due to their heterogeneity, precariat individuals remain isolated from each other unaware of

their mutual belonging to the same class. In line with a general definition of vulnerability that relates the concept to exposure to risk in the face of an uncertain future (Brown 2022; Ferrarese 2018), Jon-Arild Johannessen (2019) envisions precarity as extending to the majority of workforce in the globalized near future in the form of rapidly changing, unstable working conditions, while Ulrich Beck (2006) and Ferrarese (2018) press on the irony that it is the anticipation of harm in the form of difference and its visibilization in the public sphere what makes individuals vulnerable in the contemporary risk society.

A worth-noting classification of vulnerability is propounded by Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2014) after they list four different dimensions in which human lives are vulnerable: first, because of our embodied nature, human beings have bodily needs and are subject to "physical illness, injury, disability, and death; and depend on the care of others for extended periods during our lives" (1); second, because of our social and affective dimension, humans are "emotionally and psychologically" exposed to situations of loss, grief, neglect, abuse, rejection, etc.; third, because of our sociopolitical relations, humans are likely to suffer from instances of exploitation, oppression, or rights abuses; finally, because our existence is enmeshed to our natural environment, humans are vulnerable to the consequences of our very actions into the environment. Their taxonomy of vulnerability attempts to respond to the question of what vulnerability is by addressing its source as well as its states. According to its source, vulnerability can be considered inherent, situational, and pathogenic, whereas vulnerability can be classified as dispositional or occurrent when referring to states of likelihood that range from potential to actual vulnerability (7). Alternatively, their classification assembles the two main theoretical responses that vulnerability has received to date, mentioned above, and articulates it around the alternative between a universal attribute of (non)human life either dependent on our embodied nature or dependent on an unequal distribution of power or individuals' ability to respond to vulnerable events or conditions. Therefore, inherent vulnerability addresses those vulnerable occurrences "intrinsic to the human condition," namely "our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social natures" (7) and situational vulnerability refers to its context-specific manifestations: "caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups" (7). Finally, by pathogenic vulnerability, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014) refer to ethically complex forms of situational vulnerability, predominantly those occurring "when a response intended to ameliorate vulnerability has the paradoxical effect of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones" (9).

Ferrarese (2018) has underlined a connection between vulnerability and economy-based sociopolitical oppression in European social sciences since the 1990s (19) that Achille Mbembe (2003) had already explored in his notion of *necroeconomy*, i.e., economy that makes possible, takes profit of, and manages death (40) as the most extreme form of vulnerability. Mbembe scrutinizes how emergent social configurations consist in subjecting large masses of populations to a status of "living dead" (40) that substantially complicates hitherto sharply outlined categories employed to critically approach various forms of vulnerability, namely "resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom" (40). Thus, the limits between these categories become imprecise. Upon exploring the figure of the suicide bomber, Mbembe reflects on the materiality of the self-immolator body, by which his/her very corporeal status allows it both to conceal a weapon and to become one, in its strategic search for proximity to the body of the others in locations traditionally associated with everyday life (36). This violent act merges homicide and suicide, agency and self-destruction. Taking recourse to Paul Gilroy's (1993) *The Black Atlantic*, Mbembe affirms that this form of suicide epitomizes the subject's utter refusal to live through an oppressive situation characterized by lack of justice by agentially enacting the choice to requisition control of his/her own death that is ultimately spectacularized in the contemporary world. These heinous acts of violence seek to publicly denounce how our daily pursuits are only delusionally perceived as sovereign, self-sufficient, autonomous, and grievable because these events gesture toward an attempt to momentarily make for the perpetual uneven distribution of vulnerability among individuals and groups. Moreover, Stef Craps (2012) pointed at structural oppression as the cause of such vulnerable condition, which in turn was traversed by other uncertain life conditions, such as migration, disenfranchisement, pollution, and many other forms of violence.

Quantitative Economy of Equality

Common to all previous definitions of vulnerability is the categorical distinction between opposites on the pervasive basis of a humanitarian quantitative economy of equality involving political rights, social, or environmental balance, aimed at preserving the ontological integrity that vulnerability allegedly jeopardizes. Under managerial logics, this economy of equality rests on a hierarchically calculated system of values, a "mathematical morality" (Beck 2009, 142) that makes its meaning and transactions possible, whereby "risks [understood as vulnerabilities] remain fundamentally localized, mathematical condensations of wounded images of a life worth living" (Beck 1992, 28). Within this quantitative frame, disability is theoretically framed as a disorder of the perfect or normal function of the body, precarity is shaped as a disorder of asymmetrical distribution

of goods and rights, climate change is reduced to a disruption of the natural ecosystem, and gender vulnerability is approached as an imbalance in social roles. At the top of this hierarchy—which Beck (2009), Ferrarese (2018), and Brown (2022) have identified as a social, political, and discursive construct—resides an assembled ideology based on utopian order or normative happiness (Ahmed 2010) portrayed as the still picture of invulnerability and sovereign integrity. Human societies strive to restore this primal, ideal state in the event of its undesirable loss as if it had ever actually existed beyond mere imagining. Inescapably, such quest leads to increasing vulnerability (Beck 2009), often in the form of "unwarranted paternalism and coercion of individuals and groups identified as vulnerable" (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014, 2).

However, embodied or material reality alongside the systems of meaning that represent it are not only necessarily dynamic but also differential. Grounded on Apolliean notions of symmetry, balance, and sameness—in contrast to the dreaded Dionysian chaos and mayhem that may generate lack of autonomy, control, and agency—both qualities (dynamicity and differentiality) resist a quantitative economy of equality. Within this quantitative distribution, meaningful value underlies the perpetuation of a restorative logic ill-premised from the start on the apparent worthlessness or indignity of the vulnerable. Therefore, the value system of a quantitative economy of equality is dependent on categorical distinctions that operate metonymically by imposing reductive or "one-dimensional" (Fineman 2008, 12) identities on the permeable, temporal, and fluid complexity of their material existence. The idea of universal vulnerability rests on the necessary failure of ontological units existing relationally in time, so that they stand in still, univocal relation of purported equal value to each other (everybody is equally vulnerable). However, as competing "interests" of vulnerable individuals or groups (Goodin 1985, 112) target imagined notions of normalcy (Titchkosky and Michalko 2009), integrity, and equality, the value of their different vulnerabilities increases with this competition. For instance, in the academic field of bioethics, Rendtorff (2015) claims that those whose autonomy (as an ideal), dignity (human worth without a price), and integrity (a life's narrative coherence) are under threat are *especially* vulnerable. Moreover, the notion of universal vulnerability often coincides with a universalist conception of vulnerability based on allegedly objective criteria that both remain culturally biased and disregard subjective experiences of "quality of life" (Schalock et al. 2005) or of a life worth living that strongly determine the vulnerability of individuals.

Thus, any individual or group scoring below the objective, quantitative rate of equality in any of the many instances that fit within a given category, such as wealth, health, or autonomy, is metonymically labeled vulnerable, disregarding the fact that he or she might meet or excel equality

rates in a quality-based system of value. This phenomenon ontologizes a crippled person as vulnerable no matter how wealthy, a precariat woman as vulnerable no matter how healthy or clever, or a natural ecosystem as vulnerable to human intervention no matter how violent the natural phenomena (i.e., a volcano) in the said ecosystem might be for human and nonhuman living beings. Failing to equal the balance rate of any system, group, or individual enables this quantitative economy of meaning to value them as vulnerable while obscuring the many possible qualities under which they would prove autonomous. Understanding vulnerability as a metonymical category acquiesces to provide an ethical response or redistribution of goods and justice only by devaluing, stigmatizing, and discriminating the very individuals, groups, or systems that retributive actions claim to compensate while they merely endorse a disabling hierarchy of values. To borrow the term from Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2014), this quantitative economy of equality appallingly epitomizes pathogenic vulnerability.

Qualitative Ecology of VulnerAbility: A Proposal

Conversely, the embodied experience of vulnerAbility based on dynamic and differential qualities remains far from the metonymical categorical reduction that a quantitative economy of equality makes of it. Instead, a qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility[3] proposes a generation of correspondences based on hypotyposis. The *transcorporeality* or *porosity* of bodies to a world of other material beings that Alaimo (2008, 2010) relates to the experience of vulnerability not only allows for the fluid distribution of vulnerability among bodies along time and space, but also allows for the coexistence of overlapping capacities and vulnerabilities that are mutually exclusive only from the perspective of a quantitative economy of equality. A qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility based on multiple overlapping qualities and potentialities presented by hypotyposis that are equivalent in worth or complementary in value provides an alternative to the quantitative economic approach to equity because it ensures the coexistence of (non)human dignity with the embodied experience of vulnerability. A qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility rests on mutual differential value based on complementarity rather than loss and presses on symbiotic logics as the target of relationality and interdependence. Leaving aside hierarchical structures, its differential value system generates meaningful value (in terms of worth and human dignity) instead by virtue of the complementary relation of equivalent qualities. Thus, in line with Brené Brown's (2012) understanding of vulnerability, the vulnerable child or aging parent demands the care that makes their caretaker valuable, while their own value may rest on providing the experience of love and

connection, a sense of purposefulness, or the means for economic support to said caretaker. The allotment of equivalences in symbiotic qualitative ecologies of vulnerAbility is underpinned by their difference, instead of their equality, explored with hypotyposis rather than metonymy processes. A qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility allows for the existence of an ethical demand that is no longer undergirded in loss, as well as of an ethical response that does not take recourse to surrogate vulnerability. It spirals universal and situational, subjective experiences of vulnerability into one another, porously *trans-forming* their own categories into each other. A qualitative ecology of vulnerAble symbiosis permits difference in equivalence rather than equality as vulnerAbility pays in meaningful quality, not meaningless quantity.

Thus, the configuration of this qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility involves re-signifying vulnerability as the interdependent agency—rather than as a sign of the systemic failure—of the individuals, groups, or systems with the potential to turn the whole ethical system upside down. Instead of demanding an ethical response from allegedly superior and autonomous subjects, the vulnerAble symbiotic posthuman subject displays a qualitative strength equivalent to the quantitative autonomy it can relinquish and is established as the response-*able* (though not accountable) ethical face (in Levinasian terms) in a complementary ethical response. Be it willing or circumstantial, this resignification of vulnerability makes all individuals equivalent in worth and dignity, preventing social exclusion based on stigma and fostering social cohesion based on complementarity (rather than charitable redistribution under the guise of solidarity). In this case, the premise does not rely on the restoration of a lost imagined ideal, but on a shared consent to meaningful exchange.

Within a qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility, women hitherto deemed vulnerable because they respond to the ethical demands of motherhood that a particular social system imposes on them can be dignified as worthy (indispensable, in fact) members of the community as they display a strength corresponding to the task or burden that would label them as vulnerable. Likewise, social groups within the category of the precariat can be valued if they are re-conceptualized as the necessary support of a networked, globalized economy; the mentally ill can be physically strong, the limping soldier can see the hole in the ground that the blind child helps him go round. No*body* is invulnerAble. Extreme forms of vulnerAbility such as death also become most meaningful, often providing the ideological basis for national identity, inspiration for strengthening various group allegiances, or a sense of transcendence, as is the case of heroes or martyrs. Symbiotic ecologies of vulnerAbility give meaning to raw quantifiable (no matter how big) data that otherwise stand as meaningless calculations. Meaning, however, may come at a cost that is not difficult to

envision in the form of extreme ideologies of oppression trading vulnerability for dignity. That is why the limits of meaning must be established within symbiotic *equi*valence *and* willing consent. Within these limits, a qualitative ecology of vulnerAbility withholds from justifying or celebrating imposed vulnerable embodiments for the sake of social cohesion, while it re-signifies vulnerability hypotyposically as a complex, fluid, relational, and meaningful embodied experience. An ecology of vulnerAbility 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. What is at stake is the consensual equivalence of each exchange for both the individuals and collectivities that become embodied in each symbiotic encounter.

An Overview of *Embodied VulnerAbilities in Literature and Film*

The present volume is undergirded by the notion that textual discourse, be it in literary or audiovisual format, renders hierarchical discourses based on metonymical oversimplifications defective as these artistic manifestations prove particularly suited for hypotyposis. Since they allow the intersecting categories to coexist in nonexclusive, complementary relation, they present signifying models for the becoming of qualitative ecologies of vulnerability. They also have the capacity to connect moments in history so that the effects of slow violence in the environment and its inhabitants are visibilized and instantiated at a single glance (Nixon 2011) which, in Butler's (2004) view, can make their disposable lives matter enough to elicit the ethical response required to diminish their vulnerability. Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015, 2023) has also highlighted the key role of literary texts in generating readerly ethical responses to mental, physical, or social disabilities. Yet while textual or audiovisual (non) fictions can counter ethical indifference to familiar forms of vulnerability by calling attention to them, they can also increase said vulnerability by making it over-visible (Fernández-Santiago and Gámez-Fernández 2023). In competing for the ethical attention of information-saturated readership/spectatorship, aesthetic representations of vulnerability risk reducing vulnerable subjects to aesthetic commodities (Dorlin 2016) exploitable solely for their narrative potential (Mitchell and Snyder 2000), or sensationalism (Garland-Thomson [1997] 2017). In this context, the present volume explores assumptions deeply ingrained in the vulnerable body as well as the challenges that representing embodied vulnerAbilities posit for readership, spectatorship, and artists in fostering aesthetic exposure for the sake of ethical dialogue and sociopolitical agency. Such line of

questioning will surface widely circulated and stereotyped assumptions about normalcy, autonomy, and sovereignty that systematically allocate exacerbated versions of vulnerability and precarity to the other, who often remains silenced and invisibilized or visibly stigmatized.

The scope of analysis of this volume includes canonical and non-canonical works in narrative, drama, performance, poetry, and film produced in English, Spanish, Japanese, and French languages around the world. But as this volume considers the representation of vulnerability across multimodal, multilingual products created in different cultures, it also triangles the application of vulnerAbility with conceptualizations of the material aspects of the body in its nuanced hypotyposis of embodiment and affect, tackled from well-known and widely established approaches such as ecocriticism, trauma studies, or affect theory, among others. This feature threads each chapter together into a meaningful whole which depicts vulnerability across literary and filmic studies, genres, languages, cultures, and ecologies, amid other social, economic, geopolitical, and national particularities in the hope that they help foster future qualitative ecologies of vulnerAbility.

Maria Grajdian broaches the volume by focusing on the performances of Takarazuka Revue produced in Japan for the last five to seven years. Employing ethnographical research, Grajdian investigates the nature of what she calls the *masculinity of vulnerability*, based on the view that male characters represented by female actors perform roles that open up a space for the revision and transformation of the *bushidô* tradition, predicated on predetermined behavior codes for gender roles. In Chapter 2, Marta Miquel-Baldellou offers an interesting contrapuntal perspective to that of masculine vulnerability in Grajdian's chapter (Chapter 1). She explores the reciprocity between the performance of vulnerability and the vulnerable quality of performance in gender and aging. Miquel-Baldellou contends that performing vulnerability complicates established dictates of female aging in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and *Fedora* since such performances can both comply with and destabilize them.

In Chapter 3, Miriam Borham-Puyal discusses Ashley Smith's autobiography *Unlikely Angel. The Untold Story of the Atlanta Hostage Hero* and its cinematic adaptation *Captive* as traditional *overcoming* narratives that challenge received notions of vulnerability. She points out that the representation of parenthood—particularly motherhood—enables vulnerable parents with a sense of purpose that heightens their resistance and resilience in the face of their personal and social vulnerabilities. Borham-Puyal offers a complementary perspective to the next chapter, in which Andrés Buesa focuses on the agential perspective of Lakota children within the Native American community depicted in Chloé Zhao's film *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. Buesa emphasizes how children exact from audiences

an ethical response stemming from an empathetic emotion that restrains from victimizing childhood on the grounds of their lack of agency. In line with these two chapters, Chapter 5 analyzes how the experience of precarity imparted by theatrical performances prompts the embodied involvement of audiences. Susana Nicolás Román's analysis of Welsh Gary Owen's plays *Iphigenia in Splott* and *In the Pipeline* interrogates the intersectional features of gendered vulnerability with other vulnerable dimensions.

In Chapter 6, Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of vulnerability informs Nicholas Hauck's coinage of the term a *poetics of vulnerability* that the scholar tests in the poetry written by the contemporary French Stéphane Bouquet and Marie-Claire Bancquart. Hauck claims that poetic language has the potential to challenge standardized conceptions of literary forms as well as normative ableist conceptions of (non)human bodies in the face of mortality as the extreme manifestation of vulnerability. Critically aided by affect theory, Paula Barba Guerrero's exploration of Ghanaian American Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* in Chapter 7 exposes the historical oppression of racialized others in US history operating through normative organizations of feeling and mental illness. She discerns alternative routes for self-definition through ambiguous affective encounters while questioning political systems based on the suffering of others. The topic of mental illness continues in Chapter 8, in which Ana Chapman reflects on the interrelationship of mental health and technology as represented in the dystopian TV series *Maniac*. Chapman challenges transhumanist promises of human perfectibility in her study of mentally disabled characters who are constantly deceived by the illusory invitation to mental well-being and autonomy. In turn, said characters seek human connection, pointing to the potential of interdependence, relationality, and affective involvement in their agential endeavor for wellness. In Chapter 9, Leonor María Martínez Serrano reads Madeline Bassnett's autobiographical poetic account of her experience of breast cancer in *Under the Gamma Camera* as the Canadian poet reflects on the body's unpredictable materiality as finite and exposed in its complex experience of pain, feelings, and affects. Martínez Serrano contends that when faced with pain, this experience also enables the body as a site for enhanced perception of the fragility not only of one's body, but of earthly existence in general.

In Chapter 10, McKew Devitt analyzes forms of resistance represented in political and literary expressions of the depopulation phenomenon known as *España vaciada* or emptied Spain in rural areas as forms of vulnerability. Devitt argues that Lara Moreno's *Por si se va la luz*, Alberto Olmos' *Alabanza*, Sergio del Molino's *La España vacía*, and María Sánchez's *Tierra de mujeres* denounce the historical construction of such

areas through the lens of both urban and masculinized perspectives and bring about a conceptual shift of the relationship between the rural and urban. Luisa María González Rodríguez also addresses the vulnerability of displaced populations in Chapter 11, but as the result of a conditional hospitality that establishes hostile socioeconomic and spatial boundaries in the name of national security. Her analysis of Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor* focuses on the film's representation of the existential dimension of vulnerability as entangled with that of others. This site of convergence eventually strengthens the individual's sense of identity, thus contributing to the development of relational forms of agency and self-development beyond illusions of self-sufficiency.

Beatriz Pérez Zapata and Víctor Navarro-Remesal round off the volume with the last chapter by surveying the correlation between formal and thematic intimacy and vulnerability in three auto-documentaries recorded with smartphones by refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iran—namely *#Myescape*, *Chauka Please Tells Us the Time*, and *Midnight Traveler*. They argue that vulnerable film-making processes allow vulnerable subjects to actively present their vulnerability and humanity in their own terms, contributing to articulate their experience as a form of resistance in which the subjective dealing with vulnerability becomes embodied and situated for audiences rather than merely represented.

These chapters attest to the vantage position of literature and film to disrupt iterative discourses on vulnerability that further perpetuate quantitative economies of equality and to alternatively create spaces where readership and spectatorship can identify the constant reproducibility of such frames, reflect on, and discuss them, and thence agentially respond to such phenomena. Therefore, readers and audiences can deepen on their capacities for awareness of their own vulnerabilities alongside those of others so as to consider hypotyposic qualitative ecologies of vulnerAbility, predicated on their relational proximity, interdependence, agency, and affect.

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Notes

1 Readers may be aware that STEM refers to the academic areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, whereas STEAM incorporates the A, which stands for Arts.
2 According to the *MacMillan Online Dictionary*, the term *precariat* dates to the 1980s, when French sociologists used it to define unprotected, temporary workers as a new social class. www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/the-precariat
3 Despite its similar title, Marissia Fragkou's (2019) *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre* inventories various contemporary international social, economic, and political phenomena such as "exponential increase of refugees," "increasing warnings about climate change and environmental disasters," "terrorist attacks," "the outcomes of austerity practices," and "the intensification of nationalist discourses driven by ideologies of national sovereignty" (2–3) that comprise what she terms "a social ecology of precarity," which relates issues of "dispossession, intolerance, fear, xenophobia, uncertainty and disillusionment for the future of humans and the planet" (3).

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