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Introduction: Vulnerability

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In the introduction to his 2015 book, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*, Jean-Michel Ganteau underlines both "the ubiquity" of vulnerability and "the currency it has achieved over the last two decades" (2).

> The keywords "vulnerability" and "vulnerable" recur frequently as applied to such fields as health (including psychiatry and psychoanalysis), the ethics of care with special reference to women, children and the elderly, environmentalism and sustainable development, and also sociology (the sociology of work featuring prominently), economy, politics, criminal law, etc. Such a wide variety of applications point[s] to the resolutely interdisciplinary inflection of the notion [...]. The main impression is that vulnerability has come to spread over most disciplines in the social sciences. (Ganteau 2-3)

Does it mean that we have developed a fascination for vulnerability or that we have been living in "vulnerable times"?[1] The answer is probably both, for sundry reasons—among them the development of information technology, of gender and minority concerns, the global circulation of images, the economic and political consequences of globalization, political events, etc.

If vulnerability is so ubiquitous, it is also because it is a tricky, plastic notion that is "fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject" (Butler, 2004 43). However, a quick look at the etymology i.e. the Latin *vulnus, vulneris* for wound and the OED—a susceptibility to harm—suggests that one is vulnerable when they have been wounded, injured, hurt or harmed. Or when they are in a state of greater weakness, more fragile, and therefore more easily wounded or harmed. The adjective vulnerable, therefore, mostly applies to people experiencing suffering or disability, victims of trauma, violence, social injustice—which "bears witness to an essential paradigm shift: that which saw the move from an era of suspicion to one of attention to and solicitude for victims [...]" (Ganteau 3).

Not everybody, however, has the same approach to vulnerability. In *Recovering Bodies* (1997), Thomas Couser writes that "bodily dysfunction is perhaps the most common threat to the appealing belief that one controls one's destiny" (9). A specialist in Disability Studies, he considers that the major human vulnerability lies in the body and the susceptibility to illness

[1] "Vulnerable times" was the Presidential theme for the 2014 MLA Convention in Chicago.

and death that is intrinsic to being alive. In a later book, *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004), Couser defines vulnerable people as "persons who are liable to exposure by someone with whom they are involved in an intimate or trust-based relationship but are unable to represent themselves in writing or to offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else" (xii). In other words, as suggested by the subtitle of the book, *Ethics and Life Writing*, Couser is concerned with ethical vulnerability, which involves not just humans alone but humans as they relate to others. The Swiss philosopher and ethics specialist, Nathalie Maillard, similarly considers that humans are characterized by "ontological vulnerability" (198, translation mine) that results from a radical dependence on a context made up of people, resources and forces. For Maillard, vulnerability derives from all external elements that may affect the human subject. Annie B. Satz, a law expert, includes "all living beings" in her definition since, throughout their life span, they "are vulnerable to the effects of biology and environment, such as disease, natural disaster, and war. Vulnerability is thus a shared and constant state among living beings that cuts across social, geographic and species boundaries" (185). Despite minor differences from one theorist to another, it appears that vulnerability is mostly based on human fragility in all its dimensions, i.e. the subject's dependence on others, which involves a form of interdependence making humanity fundamentally relational (Maillard 16).

In her famous 2004 essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Judith Butler also concentrates on the "vulnerability to the other" (29) as she explains that "the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (26). Whether she is concerned with women or precarious populations in the United States and abroad, Butler analyzes vulnerability in sociological and political terms. In a recent essay, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" (2014), she even writes:

> if we accept that part of what a body is (and this is for the moment an ontological claim) is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support, then we are suggesting that it is not altogether right to conceive of individual bodies as completely distinct from one another. [...] We cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside this conception of relations. (5)

Whether we follow Couser, Maillard, Satz or Butler, being vulnerable appears to be both innately human—which does not mean that other living beings cannot experience it—and negative, as it suggests physical and psychological risks, if not weakness, whether coming from inside or outside. However, Butler's approach to vulnerability is not completely negative as she also associates vulnerability with political resistance:

> Vulnerability can emerge within resistance movements and direct democracy precisely as a deliberate mobilization of bodily exposure. I suggested earlier that we had to deal with two senses of resistance here: resistance to vulnerability that belongs to certain projects of thought and certain formations of politics organized by sovereign mastery, and a resistance to unjust and violent regimes that mobilizes vulnerability as part of its own exercise of power. ("Rethinking Vulnerability" 18)

Erinn Gilson, another American philosopher, goes a step further in her analysis of vulnerability since she considers that it is "not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us" ("Vulnerability" 310). In other words, she shifts the paradigm, contending that vulnerability can be empowerment and not just weakness. Thus she defines vulnerability as "a basic kind of openness to being affected and affecting in both positive and negative ways, which can take diverse forms in different social situations (for example, bodily, psychological, economic, emotional, and legal vulnerabilities)" ("Vulnerability" 310). For Gilson, vulnerability is neither "transient" nor does it "concern only some individual and not others," but it is "a primary and fundamental common condition" ("Vulnerability" 310). She even coins the phrase "epistemic vulnerability" that refers to "a positive type of vulnerability" entailing "the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party" (*Ethics* 93-94).

Vulnerability as weakness *and* empowerment is one of the major issues addressed by the contributors to this issue as they explore vulnerability and its representation in English and American literatures.

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