Introduction

Current Literary Representations of Vulnerability. Ethical and Aesthetic Concerns

Miriam Fernández-Santiago and
Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández

Introduction: Vulnerability as an Academic Conundrum

The term "vulnerability," critical legal theorist and feminist jurist Martha Albertson Fineman (2021) argues, "is a widely employed term in everyday discourse. It is used colloquially, as well as rhetorically in political debates and formally in human rights decisions" (185). In addition, by addressing individuals or groups with the adjectival form *vulnerable*, according to Fineman, such phrase suggests "disadvantaged, discriminated against, or subordinated" or alternatively refers to a "weakness or deficiency" (185). In its scientific or academic usage, vulnerability is a term widely employed in different fields of study as well, ranging from philosophy, psychology, human geography, to civil engineering or computer security. Political scientist Alyson Cole (2016) affirms that "the concept is elastic and seemingly multi-purpose" (112); and human geographer and environmental scholar Benjamin Wisner (2016) acknowledges that "the history of the term vulnerability is long and complex" (1). Two of the reasons for such complexity are firstly that "it involves many characteristics of people and groups that expose them to harm and limit their ability to anticipate, cope with, and recover from harm," and, secondly, that "workers in many disciplines such as public health, psychology, geography, and development studies (among others) have different ways of defining, measuring, and assessing vulnerability" (1). These areas of academic research nonetheless are only some of the many possible endeavors within the field of vulnerability studies.

This multiplicity makes the attempt to delineate the term a very intricate task, which scholars have already tried out by exploring the particularities of the concept as well as by reviewing its scholarly use in history.[1] Cole (2016) warns that the "genealogy [of vulnerability] needs to be acknowledged and evaluated" after describing that vulnerability studies were "shaped by debates in the 1980s and 1990s over oppression, identity and agency" (260). According to Cole, the term *vulnerability* is employed by different scholars with various meanings. In line with those explorations, Cole states, scholars have established the following adjectival modifiers in

DOI: 10.4324/9781032130323-1

their theoretical considerations: "'social vulnerability;' 'ontological vulnerability;' 'inherent,' 'situational' and 'pathogenic vulnerability;' 'racial vulnerability;' 'embodied vulnerability;' and 'moral vulnerability'" (2016, 263). However, there are others, and the list continues to grow.

Furthermore, Estelle Ferrarese (2016a, 149) points out the differing meanings of the term in varying geopolitical locations such as the US, India, and Europe. As an example of such diversity of characterizations, the definition provided by the United Nations Office for Disasters Risk Reduction (UNDRR) reads: "The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards" (UNDRR website).[2] In contrast to this definition denoting the understanding of vulnerability from the social sciences, a definition of vulnerability stemming from the field of the Humanities—illustrated by Marina Berzins McCoy's study of vulnerability as a virtue in ancient Greek thought and literature—is the following: "part of the human condition that is concerned with living as temporal creatures who undergo change and transformations of various sorts and who live with an awareness of the likelihood of change" (2013, vii). Thus, definitions of the term prosper and sprout, placing focus on diverse features of the concept somewhere along a wide spectrum held between binaries such as condition and ontology, individual and social, private and public, ethics and politics, responsibilities and rights, negative and positive, risk or hazard and safety, and agency and passivity, among others.

Ferrarese (2016b) comments on the tension present in different theories of vulnerability conceived of as either a moral or a political object of enquiry, yet spanning from historical explorations whose main representative is Emmanuel Levinas and his theoretical notion of the face which emerges in front of my totality—that is, my narcissistic perceptive capacities—to disrupt it with the ethical call "you shall not commit murder" (Levinas 2007, 199, 216, 262, 303), thus disrupting my totality by overflowing it and imposing on it the ethical responsibility toward the existence of the other's face, revealing my incapacity to epistemologically apprehend his/her infinitude either by objectifying or by reducing it. Ferrarese wittingly points to the essence of vulnerability as "a dyad, a confrontation between two faces" (2016b, 225), recalling the Roman God Janus, the mythic figure of the two faces, to which we shall return.

The term *vulnerability* consolidated in the 1970s and 1980s in poverty and development studies to address the impact of hazards and (natural) disasters in specific population segments, but it was at the turn of the new millennium when it began to be used extensively particularly after the geopolitical reconfiguration brought about by 9/11 terrorist attacks. Amid this theoretical constellation of definitions that we have not even began to sketch in these pages, Judith Butler was one of those scholars to further develop vulnerability in the aftermath of the 9/11 to signify the

undesirable exposure of nations and peoples to war-related acts of violence. In 2004, Butler interrogated the effects that a newly discovered vulnerability had on the exceptionalist basis of US national discourse and its instrumentalization, when used to justify the implementation of repressive policies at home and acts of war abroad. Butler (2009) also questioned *whose* lives mattered on an international scale, as well as *whose* vulnerabilities remained invisible and uncontested as nationalist discourses attempted to overcome the US sense of its own fragility by drawing attention to the vulnerability of peoples and more deprived nations whose lives not only did not matter but were perceived as a compensation for the US's newly found vulnerability.

Butler adopted the terms *precariousness* and *precarity* to describe two different conceptions of her theoretical approach. Precariousness is an inherent condition in all lives, not only human, simply because they are subject to die—that is to say, the material existence of bodies is exposed to eventualities and processes such as illness, hunger or aging. Moreover, Butler (2009) affirms that "precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (14). In turn, precarity refers to a "politically induced condition" by which

> certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection.
>
> (Butler 2009, 25)

Precarity thus is a condition of existence without predictability or security, which affects human material and/or psychological welfare. Since then, the concept of precarity and its critiques have developed critically to explore the socioeconomic conditions endured by peoples living in the so-called Third World countries or emerging economies in the context of globalization. Ferrarese (2016b) analyzes Butler's political claims of vulnerability by acknowledging a shift in Butler's concern and that "the vulnerability usually in question now is much more material. And 'precariousness' and 'precarity' have taken over Butler's work from this earlier use of the term vulnerability" (226).

One of the most interesting theoretical proposals is that of Fineman's (2021) *vulnerability theory* "as a universal heuristic tool" (186) and its most recent critique (Davis and Aldieri 2021). Fineman explains that

vulnerability theory is "based on a universal and biological conception of the individual" (186). For vulnerability theory, humans "are all vulnerable and constantly so. Vulnerability is the human condition" (186). This definition of the human is predicated on embodiment, i.e., "we are corporeal beings and as a result are vulnerable to changes in both our physical and social wellbeing over the life course"; thus, the body becomes an "anthropological or ontological concept" (186). However, under this premise, the proposal of vulnerability theory does not make room for increasingly technologized human ontologies that emerge from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) and the transhuman project and the direct relationship between wellbeing and access to such technologies. Besides this still underdeveloped or consciously produced blind spot, vulnerability theory is described in contradistinction to critical theory, for it disregards "traditional identity categories," as well as the "specific, targeted discrimination or disadvantage" (186) of certain groups. Instead, it "evaluates the human condition, incorporating all the developmental phases of human life not just the adult and fully functioning stage" (186) which dismantles the fallacy of "the autonomous, independent liberal subject that now dominates theory" (189) or the picture of "ideally independent, fully-functioning adults" (Fineman 2020, 27) and places the emphasis on the resilience of individuals who in turn reject "the restrained state" and envision "a state responsive to the complexities of the human condition" (2020, 33).

Davis and Aldieri (2021) argue that Butler's conceptual separation between precariousness and precarity and her exploration of resistance are better equipped to critically respond to the current neoliberal context than Fineman's notion of vulnerability and resilience. For them, Butler's precariousness already encompasses Fineman's vulnerability as a universal condition that even reaches beyond the human to all living creatures; alternatively, precarity theoretically relies on critical theories of oppression that Fineman leaves aside, opening a space for the objection, in the words of Cole (2016), that "some of us are more vulnerable than others" (260). In addition, these authors warn that Fineman's descriptive vocabulary of resilience risks reproducing and reinforcing the same neoliberal forces it seeks to avoid, by highlighting her choice of expressions like "individualized responsibility, "resources or assets," "human resources" (326), or "human capital" (327), or when describing vulnerability in terms such as "destinies and fortunes" (325), "setbacks" and "misfortunes" (326). Therefore, they prefer Butler's resistance, which moves away from exclusive reliance on the same institutions and states that exacerbate precariousness into precarity to explore other forms of collective responses to such injustices.

Literary Representations of Vulnerabilities: A Short Appraisal

The literary representation of different vulnerabilities is a narrative, dramatic, and poetic resource as old as literature itself, but it has only

recently been approached by literary criticism under the common frame of vulnerability studies. The apocalyptic anxieties that characterized the end of the 20th century already favored the development of a discourse on human and environmental vulnerability. But the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, sadly opening the new millennium, framed the theoretical formulation of vulnerability from an ethical perspective—above a political one, according to Ferrarese (2016b)—around Butler's *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004). Butler's work strongly resonated with cultural, critical, and postcolonial theorists, particularly those concerned with literary theory and analysis. Butler's initial theorization of vulnerability propounded that representing precarious lives would contribute to minimizing them by making them visible and, therefore, by making them matter.

The interconnected effects of globalization on economy, migration, digital communications, and ecology, together with the more recent effects on health of the COVID-19 pandemic, have reconceptualized vulnerability as a relational ontology with an emphasis on porosity or liquidity—echoing Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualization—of geopolitical boundaries, as well as of humanity to forms of non-human living and non-living embodiments, sentiences, and intelligences, rather than differential totality.[3] This global focus thus draws on a resurgence of Spinozian monism in the recent apparition of designations such as "hyperorganism" or "hyperobject" (Morton 2013) as much as it does on the Neobaroque contestation of categorical differences (Calabresse 1992).

With a similar spirit, Jean-Michel Ganteau (2015) has also claimed that what he calls *vulnerable texts*, or texts that conceptualize mental and physical weakness as an intrinsically human condition, can help trigger political change based on a social ethics of vulnerability and mutual care. Ganteau has recently identified vulnerability as "a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture and a template for the contemporary subject" (2015, 5). A growing number of academic publications across disciplines—including the medical humanities, disability studies, sociology, economics, artificial intelligence, philosophy, ecology, and gender studies, among others (Jeong, Chung, and JeKim 2021)[4]—support Ganteau's opinion and find it increasingly relevant in many literary works. In this sense, the analyses of the literary texts in this volume reveal insight into the aesthetic and ethical concerns of current representations of vulnerability that necessarily involve a specific definition of vulnerability itself while also raising the question about the increasing interest it generates in literary discourse at this specific historical time.

However, the exploitation of vulnerability as a sensationalist device (Garland-Thomson 1997; Mitchell and Snyder 2000) competing for attention in information-saturated global media often has the effect of blunting the audience's capacity to empathize with forms of vulnerability so extreme that they can only recognize it as either too alien or too

fictional. The representation of vulnerability in literary form is also affected by the neoliberal market's demand for the spectacular, and the reification and commoditization of a cathartic effect that ends up desensitizing a readership or audience who finds aesthetic pleasure in their temporary identification with, as well as immediate detachment from, representations of vulnerability. From this angle, Byung-Chul Han (2015) has also recently warned against the dangers—rather than advantages—of the overexposure of personal intimacies in the online public spaces of what he calls the "society of exhibition" by claiming that—contrary to Butler's and Ganteau's thesis—the spectacularization of such overexposure increases social and individual vulnerability by blunting the moral imperative that should make vulnerability matter.

Under the prism of an ontological paradigm valuing integrity, safety, self-sufficiency, freedom, health, and autonomy, the porosity signaled by vulnerability is related to ungrievability, precarity (Butler 2004) and risk (Beck 1986; Brown 2021). The vulnerable condition is therefore targeted as undesirable, something to be prevented and avoided. This explains why it triggers social reactions that exclude (terminate, ignore, not grieve for) vulnerable subjects and aim for utopian visions of *invulnerability*, in a fashion that has traditionally been represented in literature mostly in god-like figures, classical heroes, and superhero fiction (also termed as *invincibility*) in comics, graphic novels, or video games. According to Butler (2004), however, vulnerability does not cause but emanates precisely from exclusionary practices preventing grievability. Paradoxically, she also considers vulnerability to be what conditions the ethical response that allows for social cohesion. Thus, vulnerability seems not only to have the potential to unleash powerful ethical, political, and aesthetic responses with a strong impact on individual and social change but also to signify the superior strength of vulnerable subjects in the form of resilience as well as the capacity for self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Hence, vulnerability is regarded as both positive and desirable or negative and undesirable.

Still, while Levinas (2007) propounded that the will to respond to the ethical demand in the face of infinity depends solely on the individual, Butler (2004; 2009) leads the current common opinion that public visibilization is a primary condition of such demand. If this standpoint is critically accepted, the ethical demand urged by vulnerability depends on the (in)visibility of vulnerable alterity as much as on how individuals or collectives *represent* its vulnerable face. Like Janus's face, the face of vulnerability is a double face: grieving for the vulnerable involves the aporia of acceptance as well as rejection—sameness and difference—of the vulnerable condition. The representation of vulnerability thus is always poised on the fine line between inclusion and stigma, solidarity and pity, depending on how vulnerability is visibilized as much as on its invisibility. A vulnerability scale can thus be envisioned that refers to the type of ethical response that visibilization elicits from ethically responsive subjects, as can be seen in Table 0.1

Table 0.1 Vulnerability Scale

Invisible	*Visible*				
	Non-grievable Stigmatized Spectacularized			Grievable	
		Face	Care	Resilience	Redemption
	Sacralized Demonized Ridiculized				Heroism
Radical vulnerability		Vulnerability			Invulnerability

The historical context of globalization only adds intensity to the ethical problem of representation (ten Have 2016, 15). While the Levinasian subjective totality needed to respond to merely human infinity, in the context of globalization the posthuman porosity of millennial subjects' totality opens them to the global facelessness of an interrelated multitude of non-human animals, non-animal life, non-living ecologies, and the transparent singularity of biotechnologically embodied intelligences, all of them competing for the limited resource of human attention (Citton 2017) that would ethically respond to them—or rather that would give them a face. In these circumstances, the demand of an ethical response ranks on a hierarchy of visibilization directly correlating with strategies of representation—such as defamiliarization, sensationalism, sentimentalism, and performance—which aim at attracting attention. These can potentially shape a broad aesthetic model for the literary representation of vulnerability (see Table 0.2).

The posthumanist approach is thus rather new to vulnerability studies, which is proved by the diversity of thematic concerns developed in the chapters included in this volume. Different literary genres, however, offer varied perspectives of the effects that each type of representation has on the conceptualization and implications of vulnerability. Science fiction, fantasy, and historicist revisions call for readers' attention by means of estrangement from the daily ordinariness of their lived experiences. Although vulnerabilities visibilized by estrangement can increase attention by heightening its informational load, this type of visibilization also widens the gap between readers and the vulnerable face demanding an ethical response from them, which precludes—or at least diminishes—such ethical demand. As a result, readers can experience a satisfactory cathartic effect without being compelled, or even able to become accountable, in the face of infinity, and, sometimes, rather be driven to redirect their ethical response to blame third-party perpetrators.

Table 0.2 Attention-based Vulnerability Aesthetics

Defamiliarization	*Sensationalism*	*Sentimentalism*	*Performance*
Science fiction	Radical vulnerability (imbalance)	Essentialism (truth)	Vulnerable text
Historicism (grieving or seeking justice)	Momentum	Stigmatization	Vulnerable reader
Fantasy (hope narrative)	Beauty/repulsion	Emotion (youth, beauty of the cripple)	Vulnerable author

The recourse to sensationalism in literary representations of vulnerability relies on amplifying its negative conditions in unbalanced situations perceived as undesirable with respect to an imagined sense of normalcy (Davis 1995) or utopian ideal, with the aim to garner higher ethical demands and responses. However, the sensationalist representation of vulnerability can easily become unwelcome or ridiculous and thus cause repulsion toward the vulnerable other, blocking readers' ethical response instead of eliciting it because of the "uninhabitability" (Butler 2004; Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016) of such a hyperbolic condition. Conversely, if exaggeration focuses on aestheticizing positive aspects of vulnerability, such as resilience or heroism, its ethical demand on readers might decrease since only the negative aspects of vulnerability demand an ethical response. Whether exaggeration relies on taking the narrative to its peak and building momentum, either on the plot, the character's features, or other narrative elements, estrangement seems to be one of its possible side effects, which can lead to the stigmatization or even sacralization of the vulnerable entities visibilized in literary form. Within the field of disability studies, a correspondence has been established between the extraordinariness and the spectacularization of disabled bodies that excludes or instrumentalizes their vulnerability in the formation of a cultural ethos (Garland-Thomson 2017). Mitchell and Snyder (2000) have also discussed the exploitation of differential disability with the term *narrative prosthesis*, a metaphorical device that builds textual strength on its potential to attract and sustain readers' attention while failing to respond to the actual demands of disabled people. Their conclusions can be extrapolated to the wider scope of vulnerability in general, where the tensions between visibilization and ethical response problematize Butler's claims about the need to visibilize precarity.

A third salient feature of attention-based vulnerability aesthetics is the recourse to sentimentality, which cuts through to the readers' amygdala through emotion rather than the more easily distracted frontal lobe. The appeal to emotion as a catalyst of ethical response in the face of

vulnerability is a common denominator of vulnerability aesthetics in the third millennium that distinguishes it from the more rational approach of ironic detachment characteristic of the second half of the 20th century (Winnberg 2003). Since 2000, "the ethical turn" taken in a broader sense within the humanities seems to come on a par with a literary aesthetics relying on the expression of emotion as some kind of essential truth that can be shared with others disregarding the deconstructivist denunciation of its constructed nature (Wallace 1993). The risk of exhibiting emotion as a sign of vulnerability runs parallel to an avowal of honesty in representation that is also a sign of strength in the form of resilience. Essentialist representations of vulnerability, however, fail to provide a response capable of doing away with the structural binary dynamics that sustain and perpetuate stigmatization in the first place, hence blocking the porous interconnection required by an ethical demand and response to vulnerability. Recourse to a heightened sentimentality that may indulge in sentimentality to enhance the visibilization of vulnerability is at risk of perpetuating normative standards of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Such norms rely on aesthetic beauty, cathartic relief, conflict resolution, and textual closure that hamper readers' willing acknowledgment of their own vulnerability. On the contrary, if they do not, readers' demand for an ethical response to their own vulnerability may equally disrupt their own ethical response to the vulnerability of others. The excessive demand for attention in the form of emotional response causing the saturation of sentiment may derive from superficial sentimentality as a merely aesthetic (not ethical) demand/response. Therefore, readers' capacity for prolonged attention or compounded attention—i.e., attention that jointly involves frontal and amygdala brain sections—exhausts itself and may block embodied action.

Finally, the correspondence between the textual visibilization of vulnerability and literary strength redirects readers' ethical demand toward textuality itself as a third party in the ethical intercourse between Levinasian totality and infinity. An ethical aesthetics intending to open the author/reader to vulnerable alterity might also operate by exhibiting its own textual vulnerability in order to reveal the porosity between the totality of the subject and the infinity of the other's face. Performative strategies such as fragmentation, and temporal dislocation identified by Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) in trauma fiction or self-reflexivity, genre hybridity, and rhetorical indirection (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 10) visibilize textual vulnerability to incomprehensibility, inattention, and boredom as readerly reactions to their own experience of uninhabitable textual vulnerability.[5] In turn, these strategies demand a similarly strong determination from readers to ethically respond to said textual vulnerability. The recourse to diverse forms of closure through lyricism, elegy, confession, or romance (Ganteau and Onega 2017, 10; Ganteau 2015, 6–9, 17), on the other hand, heightens textual (and authorial) exposure to readerly sarcasm (Greene 1986, xiii; Wallace 1993, 192–193) aimed at

their alleged honesty and transparency while favoring the porosity between readerly totality and the infinity of the visibilized referent. In making its own ethical demand to readers, the vulnerable text requires that readers be vulnerable to its call in order to become an emerging textual (imagined) face and a meaningfully embodied other at their own expense.

The sociopolitical claims of a growing number of invisible faces along the 20th century produced overlapping demands for visibilization in a chiaroscuro fashion, i.e., visibilizing the rights of Western women obscured their privilege over colored ones or visibilizing the vulnerability of precarious humanity obscured environmental vulnerability, among many other instances. As deconstruction emphasized a textual vulnerability in relation to constructed categories, it became obvious that the problem was global and had to be addressed through the interconnections of diverse vulnerable embodiments, thus redefining "vulnerability as the condition and expression of interdependence" (Ganteau 2015, 11). Between an ethical response to vulnerability that exponentially expands it by insisting on security and the radical porosity to alterity that foreclosures the possibility of meaning and attention, literary language is unique in allowing for the proliferation of concurrent yet unstable meanings, meanings that define as much as suggest, and consequently exclude as well as include, that relate as they differentiate and determine strategically; all of these meanings coexist under the common denominator of their transitory, impermanent, and tentative adscription that resists being stabilized. There is an ethics in literary language that performs ways of ethical alterity beyond difference and attunes to critical posthumanism. Vulnerability is thus inscribed in the very liminal act of determining ontologies, and their visibilization would not have any effect on making it diminish or disappear, but rather to emphasize and even create the differences that stigmatize the other and justify their vulnerability. Reducing vulnerability in others as well as acknowledging one's own thus involve a level of ontological uncertainty that addresses the body politic as much as its material embodiment. The present concern for vulnerability may well be related to the exponential increase of globalization and the permeability of its many ecotonal borders, which generate uncertainty about the future as much as revisions of past ontologies and their accompanying ethical dimensions. But if the configuration of the current ethical subject depends on the ontological reconfiguration of these ecotonal borders, what is actually at stake with vulnerability nowadays is whether human beings need to be defined as ethical subjects at all or if a new ontology of the human is at the verge of becoming.

Such becoming evokes the figure of Janus, represented by the two faces looking in opposite directions to the past and future symbolizing his governance over passages or transitions. This mythic god, associated with doorways, gates, and liminal frames and spaces where he marked both beginnings and ends, epitomizes the transformations and becomings that

operate in the ontology of things, events, (non)humans, or any other entities along time. It is precisely literally and figuratively that Janus's figure underpins the research work carried out in this volume, which aims to identify different forms of vulnerability generated in the context of the 4th IR as a result of the new function that the human subject acquires while losing its own face (in the Levinasian sense), in order to become an interface (Floridi 2014), as well as the kind of ethical demand entailed by globalized, digitalized interlocution with human and non-human forms of otherness.

The Volume *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature*

As they stand in dialogical exchange with each other, the different chapters in this volume explore the nuances of a literary aesthetics of vulnerability engaging the tensions that exist between visibilization and ethical demand in competing for the limited, diminishing resource of human attention. These chapters share their recourse to common myths or classical tragedy elements, the impending presence of (technological or not) risk and death, the ontology of reading and the epistemological limits of the human, the effects of the passage of time in (non)human entities, the degradation of nature, the repetition or reinscription of traumatic memories in the present as either a vulnerable ontological condition or a historically created one, and their unavoidable relationality or interconnected logics—among themselves and with their (natural or technological) surroundings.

In the first chapter of this volume, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder identify colonialism on American soil as the common origin of the ecological disaster and personal disability endured by indigenous populations and their environments in intersecting historical development in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, O.A. Bushnell's *The Return of Lono*, and William T. Vollmann's *Fathers and Crows*. In turn, Esther Sánchez-Pardo provides an alternative perspective in Chapter 2 in her exploration of Alexis P. Gumbs' *Dub: Finding Ceremony* about the historical loss in the oceans of a human and cultural legacy due to colonial slave oppression and abjection. The vulnerabilities and resilience of those dead in the Middle Passage and ensuing slavery are ritualized in Gumbs's poetry to celebrate and reinscribe their haunting spectralities in a new conceptualization of the Human in which vulnerability is integral to life. These two opening chapters carry out literary analyses of historical pasts represented in narrative and lyric creations to challenge hegemonic narratives about vulnerabilities and to throw new light on the interconnected nature of life forms and indigenous cultures.

Jean-Michel Ganteau analyzes in Chapter 3 the interconnectedness between human and ecological vulnerabilities in Welsh Cynan Jones's

The Long Dry, in literary contrast to the natural watery universe recreated in Gumbs's *Dub*. He argues that in the novel natural vulnerability evidenced at the macrocosmic level in climate change meets the delineation of human vulnerability. Miriam Fernández-Santiago examines in Chapter 4 Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach*. Fernández-Santiago's chapter is indicative of a post-postmodernist concern for the literary representation of human vulnerability in the new millennium. Contrary to Egan's former prose, her last novel is traditionally arranged around round characters, management of momentum, symbolic dimension, thematic sentimentality, and a cohesive plot ending in closure. While this should make Egan's narrative a strong one, Fernández-Santiago claims that the prosthetic employment of an arguably sentimentalizing exploitation of different forms of vulnerability in Egan's novel has made the author vulnerable to criticism against the ethical commitment and aesthetic quality of her narrative. In the following chapter, Peter Arnds scrutinizes how literary texts can elaborate on metaphors of vermin, insects (bees), and beasts (i.e., wolves) to construct survival narratives for (non) human vulnerable alterities in select works from different cultural contexts by German writers Roland Schimmelpfennig and Norbert Scheuer, the American Francisco Cantú, the Iraqi Hassan Blasim, and the Canadian Rawi Hage. Focusing on specific interpretations of disability narratives and literary tropes, these three chapters offer complementary ideas on the vulnerabilities at work in literary arenas and their impact on social zeitgeist.

Pakistani-British Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* is analyzed by Carolina Sánchez-Palencia by foregrounding Shamsie's representation of nonviolent force to transgress dominant hierarchies of corporeal value and resist utopian visions of cosmopolitanism and the British national violence of sacralization in the case of terror suspects, subjected to statelessness, in her postcolonial rewriting of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Chapter 7 displays Susana Onega's analysis of British Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs*, which relates vulnerability to the social invisibility that hinders mourning in a group of abject subjects whose spectral memories trigger choral grieving. Onega affirms that the very ontology of humanity depends on the reciprocal acknowledgment of human vulnerability in a fiction that recourses to Dante's *Inferno*. Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández reads Indian Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane* to propose that the mourning of a female suicide bomber places readers at the liminal spaces between circulating Internet narratives which give way to interiorized stereotypes and the erasure of Derridean *différance*; hence, fostering reading as a radical act of understanding the Other exposes the precarity features that progressively two young Muslim British females vulnerable to intersecting discrimination practices. These three chapters foreground conceptualizations of vulnerability in relation to narrative spectralities

as framed by their conflictual tension between the private and the public, the nation and the individual.

In her study of American Don DeLillo's *The Silence*, Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that human exposure to artificial ontologies has a disabling effect on transhuman autonomy, which becomes evident only during an ICT blackout to show *bare* human agency, the failure of communicative strategies, the incapacity for reflection and emotion, or the loss of life purpose. Francisco Collado-Rodríguez's analysis of Canadian-American William Gibson's *Neuromancer* inquires into the topic of immortality under the material conditions of technological immortality by contrast to the philosophical and social approaches associated with the Orpheus myth or Jonathan Swift's struldbruggs. As the risk of death disappears from the transhumanist horizon, the immortality granted by technological developments becomes such an extremely precarious form of existence that it turns the radical vulnerability of death into a single form of transhuman empowerment. The volume closes with Mónica Calvo-Pascual's exploration of the topic of vulnerability in the dystopian novels by Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Tiger Flu*. While forms of vulnerability represented in other literary genres analyzed in this volume visibilize current vulnerabilities as an effect of past events that remained unaccountable because hegemonic narratives silenced those others for their alleged infra-humanity, science fiction such as Lai's calls readers to take responsibility for their present acts as potential triggers of future vulnerabilities. These three closing chapters reinforce the connection with the opening ones, by providing the past and future contours of Janus's faces.

In these chapters, the redefinition of vulnerability in the 21st century gives voice to different posthumanist anxieties about the alleged permeability of human ontology that enables broadening the spectrum of ethical demand of and response to vulnerability, with an intriguing lead into (non)human ethical reciprocity, ranging from forms of bare human and non-human life to (non)sentience and other forms of emotional or (free-willed) intelligences. In this context, the literary texts studied in this volume exist not just as an ethical and aesthetic interface between different, porous subjectivities, by articulating a flow of demand and response, but as another possible face visibilizing as well as embodying the interconnected vulnerabilities of its particular kind of communicative act.

Acknowledgments

The Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under grant PID2019-106855 GB-I00, and the Andalusian Regional Government under grants P20-000008 and A-HUM22-UGR-20 supported the writing of this work.

The English and German Department of the University of Granada funded the open-access publication of this introduction.

Notes

1 Providing a bibliographical list would enlarge this introductory chapter beyond any logical limits. Quite productive reflections on this issue are Wisner (2016) and Ferrarese (2016a, 2016b).
2 Aware of the rather negative aspects of the definition, the following annotation ensues: "For positive factors which increase the ability of people to cope with hazards, see also the definitions of 'Capacity' and 'Coping capacity'" (UNDRR website).
3 In *Totality and Infinity* (2007), Levinas describes the ethical relationship around the figure of the face, a relationality based on the demand of and response to nonviolent openness of the face's vulnerability. Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000), however, contends that fluidity avoids responsibility (11) by the impossibility to sustain attention in the face of exponential change (8). Other nouns Bauman has critically analyzed under the *liquid* condition are love, life, fear, times, modern world, surveillance, and evil.
4 The COVID-19 pandemic has recently changed the weight of vulnerability studies from climate and digital vulnerability to health studies. In literary studies, the term vulnerability begins to raise interest after 2015 with Ganteau's and Onega's studies on 21st-century fiction.
5 While textual vulnerability and precariousness is intrinsic to all literary language as a textual form at special risk of "misinterpretation, historical erosion, exposure, inversion, [and] decentering" (Greene 1986, xvi), the rhetorical strategies employed by an aesthetics of vulnerability might tension the reader's ethical response to the demands of an uninhabitably vulnerable text (such as attention, contextual or intertextual knowledge, and suspension of disbelief) too much to actually lead to embodied action.

Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity.

Beck, Ulrich. [1986] 1992. *Risk Society. Towards A New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. London: Sage Publishing.

Brown, Patrick. 2021. *On Vulnerability. A Critical Introduction*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds. 2016. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York, NY: Verso.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War. When in Life Grievable?* London and New York, NY: Verso.

Calabresse, Omar. 1992. *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*. Translated by Charles Lambert. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Citton, Yves. 2017. *The Ecology of Attention*. Cambride and Malden, MA: Polity.

Cole, Alyson. 2016. "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique." Special Issue *The Politics of Vulnerability in Critical Horizons* 17 (2): 260–277.

Davis, Benjamin P. and Eric Aldieri. 2021. "Precarity and Resistance: A Critique of Martha Fineman's Vulnerability Theory." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 36 (2): 321–337. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.25.

Davis, Lennard. 1995. *Enforcing Normalcy. Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London and New York, NY: Verso.

Ferrarese, Estelle. 2016a. "Vulnerability: A Concept with Which to Undo the World As It Is?" Special Issue *The Politics of Vulnerability* in *Critical Horizons* 17 (2): 149–159.

Ferrarese, Estelle. 2016b. "The Vulnerable and the Political: On the Seeming Impossibility of Thinking Vulnerability and the Political Together and Its Consequences." Special Issue *The Politics of Vulnerability* in *Critical Horizons* 17 (2): 224–239.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2020. "Reasoning from the Body: Universal Vulnerability and Social Justice." In *A Jurisprudence of the Body*, edited by Chris Dietz, Mitchell Travis and Michael Thomson, 17–34. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. Ebook.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2021. "Population, Pandemics, and Politics." *International Journal of Discrimination and the Law* 21 (3): 184–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/13582291211042212.

Floridi, Luciano. 2014. *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel and Susana Onega (eds.). 2017. *Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel. 2015. *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. [1997] 2017. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Greene, Thomas M. 1986. *The Vulnerable Text. Essays on Renaissance Literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Han, Byung-Chul. [2012] 2015. *The Transparency Society*. Translated by Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior U. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jeong, Seunghoo, Ji-Bum Chung, and Byeong JeKim. 2021. "Research Trends in Vulnerability Studies from 2000 to 2019: Findings from a Bibliometric Analysis." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 56: n.p.

Levinas, Emmanuel. [1969] 2007. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

McCoy, Marina Berzins. 2013. *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. 2000. *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press.

ten Have, Henk. 2016. *Vulnerability: Challenging Bioethics*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Wallace, David Foster. 1993. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (2): 151–194.

Winnberg, Jakob. 2003. "An Aesthetics of Vulnerability. The Sentimentum and the Novels of Graham Swift." PhD diss. Göteborg University.

Wisner, Benjamin. 2016. "Vulnerability as Concept, Model, Metric, and Tool." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*. 1–51. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.25.