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About

The *Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* (*JAAAS*) is a peer-reviewed gold open-access journal which provides an interdisciplinary space for discussions about all aspects of American studies. The journal functions as a forum for Americanists in Austria and the global academic community. Published twice a year, the journal welcomes submissions on a wide range of topics, aiming to broaden the multi- and interdisciplinary study of American cultures.

Aims

Interrogating the notion of "America" and looking at the U.S. within its transnational and (trans-)hemispheric interconnections, *JAAAS* seeks to challenge disciplinary boundaries by bringing together original and innovative work by scholars who focus on topics as diverse as literature, cultural studies, film and new media, visual arts, ethnic studies, indigenous studies, performance studies, queer studies, border studies, mobility studies, age studies, game studies, and animal studies. Apart from offering insights into trans- and international American literary and cultural studies and offering European perspectives on America, the journal also solicits scholarship that deals with history, music, politics, geography, ecocriticism, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, law, and any other aspect of American culture and society.

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Special Issue
American Studies as Vulnerability Studies

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Special Issue Articles

Ongoing Research in Austrian American Studies

American Studies as Vulnerability Studies

Introduction

"Are my wounds the most convenient ways for you to know me?" wonders the queer Black feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned* (2020).[1] Indeed, what knowingness can be drawn from wounding? To ask this question means dismantling versions of vulnerability that link wounding to passive suffering. What would it mean to reject discourses of wounding that imply a diminished capacity to act? Gloria Anzaldúa once (and always) theorized *la herida abierta*—the open wound—as the literal and metaphorical US-Mexico borderlands "running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits / *me raja me raja*."[2] The open wound is her portal to *la conciencia de la mestiza*—mestiza consciousness: that multiple, ambivalent state of pain and potentiality from which she could fathom a world of border crossers whose imagination would dismantle the wounding caused by structures of domination and control.

Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness originates in and demands an active process of vulnerability—"her soft belly exposed" to obsidian knife, to "sharp eyes," to penetration, to shame, to potential threat. It demands the Coatlicue state, that "rupture in our everyday world." To enter the Coatlicue state is to become a *nahaul*, a shape-shifter. It is to be in *nepantla*, the in-between state that demands a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction. It is a descent into primal pain and psychic wounding. But it is also the passage to *concientización*, a coming-to-consciousness predicated on vulnerability and openness. Through rupture, we can actively embrace a liberatory consciousness in order to expose the collective structures that not only create conditions of vulnerability, but which might also *emerge from* being vulnerable. In Anzaldúa's liberatory *auto-historia-teoría*, vulnerability is both the *thing* and its antidote. The only way out is through: "Let the wound caused by the serpent be healed by the serpent."[3]

A conscious opening to the vulnerability of the Coatlicue state is the sacred work of the soul—a generative, productive active resistance to silencing: "Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can

lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life." From open wound into and through the Coatlicue state—"a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders"—where what awaits on the other side is that tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction. The potential in vulnerability is radical, "divergent thinking," "a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions." Here is the power to refashion and remake worlds, to communicate rupture and document the struggle. The relational, slippery, interconnected are her raw materials. Trying to hold them, "she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths."[4] Not only an individual process of renewal and remaking, Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness is a collective call to action that depends on ambivalent intersections, crossings, and multiple conditions of pain and wounding. Committed to this collective process, the following pages ask what the possibilities and potentials for resistance to violence from within violence might be. What forms of agency and resistance might emerge from narratives of vulnerability? Can we identify corresponding forms of narrative vulnerability? How can we think through narratives that relinquish victimhood for agency-within-precarity?

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This special issue explores the ambivalent nature of vulnerability as a "politically produced" condition of suffering which contains the potential for resistance and consequential social change for minoritized individuals and communities.[5] Judith Butler's now-classic rendering of vulnerability as "unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power" helps us better grasp interrelated forms of oppression,[6] yet we argue that narratives of vulnerability also foreground the relational and interconnected conditions of vulnerable lives, while at the same time engendering worldmaking projects centered around *agency* and *resistance*. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987) is one such project. But so is Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Or the oral histories of WWII-era biracial adoptees in Denmark. Or the poetry of Raquel Salas Rivera. Such texts offer new and nuanced contexts for our understanding of suffering, oppression, and stigmatization. They expand our understanding of human vulnerability as a productive concept beyond an ontological understanding.

When we apprehend vulnerability as a socially produced condition as well as a conceptual metaphor, in the manner of Anzaldúa's borderlands, vulnerability connects, amplifies, and expands queer, feminist, and critical race theorist work. In this way, attention to vulnerability brings into sharper focus and allows for a more nuanced conceptualization of the connections between different experiences of precarity

and oppression. In attending to vulnerability's aesthetic renderings across various media and genres, our aim is also to induce conversations about the various aesthetic-political strategies of cultural narratives that take up the vulnerabilities of minoritized subjects and communities. As Anzaldúa's *auto-historia-teoría* powerfully demonstrates, maintaining agency over one's life story and expressing one's vulnerability on one's own terms constitutes a radical act under circumstances of systemic oppression. This is particularly poignant when mainstream media's dominant scripts around marginalized individuals and communities commodify vulnerable lives for their own ideological purposes, often to control their narratives or to silence them altogether. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not a cry for help but an openness that in and of itself carries a potential for livingness and humanness under conditions of objectification, injury, and erasure. This is mestiza consciousness as a "way of life."

Defining Vulnerability

Current scholarship on vulnerability—and this special issue is no exception—is highly influenced by the theorization of vulnerability in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), an anthology of critical essays curated by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay. The anthology challenges the common misconception that vulnerability must always mean "victimization and passivity, invariably the site of inaction." Two assumptions typically undercut this misconception: firstly, "that vulnerability is the opposite of resistance and cannot be conceived as part of that practice," and secondly, "that vulnerability requires and implies the need for protection and the strengthening of paternalistic forms of power at the expense of collective forms of resistance and social transformation."[7] We find these misconceptions in works that view vulnerability as merely a condition for injury, such as in the writings by Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricœur. For Levinas, vulnerability is an ethical category and is equated with the subject's passivity; for Ricœur, the vulnerable subject is an "acting and suffering individual."[8] These definitions rely heavily on vulnerability's etymological roots in Latin to foreground the aspect of injurability: *vulnerāre*, meaning "to wound," or *vulnus*, "a wound." These configurations of wounding bear little resemblance to the transformative (albeit painful) potential for change-making consciousness of Anzaldúa's *herida abierta*. By foregrounding the potential for agency, activism, and solidarity, Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay reject discourses of wounding that imply a diminished capacity to act. Instead, they conceive of vulnerability as a possible condition for resistance by asking, "What would change if vulnerability were imagined as one of the *conditions* of the very possibility of resistance?"[9]

This is a question that queer writers and writers of color have long reckoned with. "The world knows us by our faces," Anzaldúa writes in *Making Face, Making Soul* (1990), "the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the

body." Yes, *haciendo caras*, making faces, reveals our souls to the world, but Anzaldúa reminds us that such vulnerability also "has the added connotation of making *gestos subversivos*, political subversive gestures." To show your face can be an act of subversion and resistance, "the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says 'Don't walk all over me,' the one that says, 'Get out of my face.'" *Haciendo cara* is a queer, feminist strategy of vulnerability that locates agency in pain and recuperates a possibility for individual and collective change: "Haunted by voices and images that violated us, bearing the pains of the past, we are slowly acquiring the tools to change the disabling images and memories, to replace them with self-affirming ones, to recreate our pasts and alter them . . . we refute those false images, *quebramos los falsos espegos para descubrir las desconocidas sombras*, we break the false mirrors in order to discover the unfamiliar shadows, the inner faces, *las caras por dentro*. To make face is to have face–dignity and self-respect."[10]

As a "a potentially mobilizing force in political mobilizations," the kind of vulnerability theorized by Anzaldúa and articulated by Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay rejects ontology-oriented definitions.[11] At the same time, deliberately not making faces can be an equally powerful and liberating response to the experience of vulnerability. To not make face means a refusal to register within dominant affective economies, such as white guilt and white pain, as Xine Yao's work on disaffection demonstrates.[12]

Indeed, understanding vulnerability via its potential for resistance demands stepping away from absolute truths and bound categories of classification. In "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" (2016), Butler argues that vulnerability is not "a primary existential condition, ontological and constitutive" but rather that "vulnerability and invulnerability have to be understood as politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power."[13] As a form of feminist critique, then, vulnerability is not *constitutive* in terms of "victimization and passivity," which thinks of bodies as being vulnerable *through* their gender, age, race, ability, etc. while upholding the paternalistic assumptions about vulnerability, long-dominant within American culture.[14] Rather, it is a *situational* vulnerability "caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups."[15] Situational vulnerability is what Chela Sandoval was getting at when she wrote, "We had each tasted the shards of 'difference' until they had carved up our insides; now we are asking ourselves what shapes our healing would take."[16] Healing, and the many forms it can take, is a radical act of resistance.

Vulnerability's potential for resistance differs from popular assumptions about resilience and "bouncing back" that are ubiquitous in neoliberal discourses of self-optimization.[17] In fact, fantasies of bouncing back are sustained by what Lauren Berlant calls "good-life fantasies."[18] These attachments are cruel because they perpet-

uate neoliberal precarity precisely through the individual's attachment to the very systems of oppression that injure marginalized individuals and communities in the first place. These forms of cruel optimism are inextricably tied to various seemingly unshakable myths: the myth of neoliberal self-optimization, the myth of domestic stability, the myth of meritocracy, and the myth of equality, to name a few. In the cultural logics and the emotional appeal of these myths, there is little room for vulnerability. On the contrary, as Sarah Bracke proposes, resilience actually stands in the way of expressions of empathy, solidarity, and kinship and fails to account for the *unequal distribution* of vulnerability.[19] In this sense, bouncing back means resisting change and, with it, the potential for solidarity, care, reparation, and healing. Being vulnerable, on the other hand, means living with the wounds.

To conceive of vulnerability otherwise—as a social condition that connects individuals implicated in the differential production and distribution of vulnerability—gestures toward the scale of its effects. Offering a critique of neoliberal governance, Leticia Sabsay urges for a move away from humanitarian approaches that center around the precarity of the individual and toward a better understanding of the co-constitutive entanglements of individual and social consequences, and "the role [individuals] play in the differential distribution of vulnerability and its political character."[20] For instance, the wounding expressed by Gumbs and Anzaldúa is situated within interlocking histories of colonial and racial violence; their modes of resistance go well beyond the recuperation of personal agency. A focus on individual bodily injury, for example, would obscure "the regulation of human-life processes under a governmental rationality that takes as its object targeted populations," according to Sabsay. "To be vulnerable," she writes, "implies the capacity to affect and be affected. This aspect of vulnerability involves a constitutive openness in the subject, regardless of whether it is wanted or not, which could be interpreted as a reminder that we are socially formed subjects whose shape and agency is actually coconstitutive with an outside that necessarily impinges on us."[21]

Emphasizing vulnerability's social dimensions also foregrounds the openness and receptivity at the core of vulnerability. Sabsay defines permeability as an openness and receptivity that is linked to vulnerability's "capacity to be affected."[22] Her concept of permeability captures vulnerability's valence as a social, not an individual, experience: "We are cultivating our ability to affirm our knowing. Jauntily we step into new terrains where we make up the guidelines as we go. We are in the present, with both feet on the ground and one eye to the future."[23] The image of openness and receptivity captured in Anzaldúa's writing might also be understood as a kind of permeability, certainly as it relates to how she theorizes literal and figurative border crossings. This interrelationship between resistance, permeability, and accountability emphasizes the agentic potential of vulnerability in new and groundbreaking ways. It is a produc-

tive lens through which to analyze the lives and life narratives of minoritized subjects without merely approaching them through the gaze of victimization. Narratives of vulnerability can give discursive, epistemological, affective, and aesthetic expression to radical, liberatory potential. The kind of worldmaking these narratives undertake refutes essentialist categories and lends vulnerability its own potentiality to think, and feel, otherwise. This ability to be "exposed and agentic at the same time" can be a productive space for a sense of solidarity, built around ideas of interdependency rather than "suffering hierarchies," to emerge.[24] It can also become the space of/for candid articulations of "minor histories" and testimony to the "radical practices of everyday life."[25]

As the few examples above show, vulnerability's relational and situational qualities are portable, able to take on new and varied significance within different critical fields. The scales and temporalities of vulnerability we engage with in this special issue are shaped by our grounding in American studies. As an intervention in the field of American studies, our work engages a series of questions targeted at vulnerability's potential as a critical prism through which to engross the field: Which themes, theories, and disciplinary directions in American studies can productively engage with questions of vulnerability? What are the prevalent idioms of vulnerability in American studies, and how have they shaped critical practices? To what extent does current critical work against racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism cohere around a shared sense of vulnerability? What shape and form do cultural representations of vulnerable lives take? What might an aesthetics of vulnerability look like?

American Studies as Vulnerability Studies

Over the past decade, vulnerability theory has emerged in American studies methodologies, practices, and field imaginaries in response to the seemingly endless conditions of contemporary precarity, many of which, of course, are embedded in historical inequalities and systems of oppression. While some scholars turn to Butler's work to locate theorizations of precarity and vulnerability, others do not. Scholars have drawn on a variety of sources and critical inspirations to emphasize the social, cultural, political, economic, and legal circumstances that cast the lives of certain individuals and communities as especially vulnerable. Although critics have increasingly turned to critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory for the tools necessary to dismantle prevalent power structures, fields such as critical legal studies, geography and environmental studies, disability studies, border studies, indigenous studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies, are productively invoking theories of vulnerability for the same purpose(s). These theories share the conviction that all bodies are vulnerable but not that all bodies experience vulnerability equally.

In collating the following examples of vulnerability's influence throughout the field, our intention is to showcase vulnerability's range of application, highlighting the unprecedented kinds of research questions that critical attention to vulnerability may open up. While much of this recent work focuses on *constellations of vulnerability*, we are particularly interested in exploring what attention to *forms of vulnerability* might offer the larger field imaginary.

The various ways in which American studies' diverse approaches harness questions of vulnerability and for what purpose differ, depending on the particular community whose vulnerability is being addressed. A quick look at a few examples highlights the diverse impact that a critical consideration of vulnerability can have on a wide array of intellectual and social justice projects. For example, in critical legal studies, vulnerability has generated new perspectives on questions of discrimination and human rights violations. A critical legal studies approach focuses on the state's obligation to ensure that no system unfairly privileges some and hurts others, requiring the state to take stock of multiple, at times intersecting, forms of oppression. As Martha A. Fineman astutely observes, "'equality,' reduced to sameness of treatment or a prohibition on discrimination, has proven an inadequate tool to resist or upset persistent forms of subordination and domination."[26] Meanwhile, for transnational feminist theory, vulnerability studies locates women and children at the center of global systems of oppression, in order to interrogate, as Wendy S. Hesford and Rachel A. Lewis write, "how concepts of vulnerability and precarity travel transnationally to produce new rationalities."[27] In Black studies, scholars theorize racial oppressions ranging from police violence to racist microaggressions as forms of vulnerability inflicted on Black subjects via "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."[28] Similarly, Susan L. Cutter's work on environmental justice argues that a "confluence of natural and social vulnerabilities" contributes to the disproportionate effects of natural disasters on marginalized communities who are underserved by basic provisions such as health care, quality of life, access to infrastructure, and a general "liveability" of places.[29] Indigenous studies scholarship centers on the interconnections between imperialism, capitalism, and environmental hazards, in particular the nexus of climate change research, colonialism, and wildlife preservation.[30] In border studies, current work examines the creation of vulnerable conditions through violent border regimes, which materializes in hostile terrains, both along militarized border sites and within the vulnerable lives of migrants, refugees, and asylees.[31] Gender, dis/ability, and sexuality cut across all these experiences of vulnerability and intensify the risk of injury and abuse on an individual as well as on a systemic level. From the perspective of disability studies, vulnerability, Ani B. Satz argues, is a "shared and constant state among living beings," which subjects certain individuals and communities disproportionately: "women, children,

racial minorities, prisoners, elderly persons, and individuals with disabilities" because of their experiences of "exploitation, discrimination, or other harm."[32] Collectively, the critical traditions referenced above point to how theorizations of power asymmetries and mechanisms of oppression contribute to American studies' sustained commitment to critiquing and resisting political and cultural hegemony.

Vulnerability as Resistance

To think of vulnerability as relation—as socially produced and distributed conditions—yields potential for community building, connection, and collective action. It implies a sense of openness to the world, which allows for forms of agency and practices of resistance to not only co-exist with but also to emerge in direct response to experiences of social and political injury. This is a relation *to* and *with* each other, the earth, and our situated histories. For Butler, rethinking vulnerability as resistance is founded in counterhegemonic action and thus, by extension, an inherently feminist project, "precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and, in fact, all minorities subject to police power for showing up and speaking out as they do."[33] For Gumbs, resistance centers around collective action against various threats of erasure, ranging from colonial genocide and slavery to late-capitalist exhaustion and species extinction. Her practices of queer, anti-racist, and interspecies kinship, especially her invitation to readers to partake in this struggle, provide opportunities for solidarity and collective action. These are not forms of passive resistance but a resistance enacted by living otherwise in the world.

We might think of this relation through collaboration, too. In the words of Anna Tsing, who, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), defines collaboration as "transformation through encounter": "Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations we all die."[34] Gumbs's *Undrowned*, on the other hand, defines collaboration as a Black feminist practice, a practice to both "combat the embedded isolation of late capitalism" and to participate "in a dance with those beyond where [she] can touch, or know, or swim to."[35] We emphatically invite our field to look beyond the theoretical frames and dialogues on vulnerability. Vulnerability work, in this context, is not so much about bringing vulnerability from the periphery to the center but rather about connecting the vulnerable edges of these multiple peripheries through their relations and collaborations. We join Gumbs in her wonderment about "what our sensitive edges have to teach us," and we further wonder what these sensitive edges in American studies might look like.[36]

Forms of Narrative Resistance

Narratives of vulnerability can be sites of wonderment about these sensitive edges through their depictions of the interrelationship between vulnerability and resistance, by resisting dominant discourses and by inviting readings to partake in experiences and expressions of vulnerability. Aesthetically, affectively, discursively, and epistemologically, they illuminate unique, lived experiences and personal, deeply intimate practices of resistance, sustenance, and endurance; they depict and create worlds in which vulnerability holds the potential for resistance; they write back against commodified depictions of victimization; they showcase the multiple potentialities of resisting through vulnerability.

Literary forms embody, represent, and amplify vulnerability work through their potential to affect readers emotionally or somatically in ways that can be difficult to name.[37] Language, style, perspective, rhythm, pace, plot, and sequencing all shape readers' engagement with the narrative. Techniques such as cut-up, collage, and intermediality have the capacity to render texts vulnerable, by physically taking them apart and disintegrating their composure, thereby embodying the vulnerability on a more thematic level. Such devices can lovingly draw readers in or confront them with abject truths. And in some cases, readers themselves are "made vulnerable by its being caught up in questions of genre," as Anneleen Maschelein, Florian Mussgnug, and Jennifer Rushworth propose.[38] This multiple-embodied vulnerability through the materiality of texts relies on and results in resistance built into the work itself; literature comes to be defined by the resistance it builds in the face of having been rendered vulnerable. Texts can communicate to audiences a sensibility toward the ambivalent state of vulnerability as both an index of insurability and a condition for resistance. Marianne Hirsch writes, "In our acts of reading, looking, and listening we necessarily allow ourselves to be vulnerable as we practice openness, interconnection, and imagination, and as we acknowledge our own implication and complicity. Aesthetic works, moreover, whether visual, literary, acoustic, or performative, can serve as theoretical objects enabling us to reflect on the vulnerability they elicit within us."[39]

The essays gathered here explore the potential of resistance through narrative and form. They bring together diverse theorizations of vulnerability and observations about the formal dimensions of narrative resistance. By extending important conversations currently emerging in various areas of American studies and vulnerability studies, they braid a novel mode of thinking American studies as vulnerability studies.

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Gulsin Ciftci's essay, "'Vulnerable as a small pink mouse': Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*," focuses on the productive interactions between vulnerability and trauma theory. Vulnerability indexes trauma's infinitude and recursion as something that is constantly generative of new emotional, social, and often legal injuries. In her reading of the texts, Ciftci shows how Yanagihara productively employs narrative fragmentation, multi-perspectivity, and temporal disarray to evoke trauma's recurring patterns of injury and abjection. She contends that vulnerability's double valence creates affective intensities for readers and establishes a sense of intimacy with the protagonist as he deals with repeated traumatic experiences. Ciftci links vulnerability to closeness in a dual sense. On the one hand, the protagonist attempts to cut himself off from the world, but, on the other hand, he attempts to foster intimate relationships. This closeness—and the aesthetic affective strategies employed in the novel's depictions of sexual trauma—registers the conditions under which vulnerability becomes a form of resistance that foregrounds human agency.

While underscoring such formal and aesthetic concerns, Leopold Lippert's essay, "On Being Topped: Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," demonstrates that vulnerability is also a powerful theoretical lens through which to view the various vulnerabilities embedded in US sexual and racial politics. Lippert explores the convergence of bodily, cultural, and social vulnerabilities in the novel's queer migrant protagonist, which he articulates through the anus. The anal experience showcases a double meaning attached to vulnerability that is both negative (through its attachment to "sexual shame and stigma, racial trauma, internalized homophobia") and productive (for it suggests that "these vulnerabilities may be turned into sources of pleasure, care reparation, and healing"), in its Butlerian dialectic approach. Lippert's theorization of "an anal politics of vulnerability" draws from an understanding that vulnerability is not only an embodied relation but also a social form.

Vulnerability, as an embodied, gendered, social, and political category, served as an important ideological trope in pro-Russian news media in the US between 1880 and 1917. As Katharina Wiedlack argues in her essay, "Suffragists and Russian Suffering: Vulnerability in Early Progressive US Movements," humanitarian narratives about Russian women who fought the Czarist regime employed the notion of female vulnerability in order to elicit international support for the Russian Revolution. By strategically focusing on Russian women's ontological vulnerability and, in turn, omitting any mention of their agency and resistance, humanitarian narratives created and circulated a "gendered myth around the martyr-heroine," which mobilized US audiences' affective responses and invited their political solidarity. On a symbolic level, however, it pitted American women against Russian women by casting the martyr-heroine as

a stand-in for Russia, who then functioned as a focalizer for the pre-modern social structures that Western nations like the US had already successfully abolished. Read against the grain of the dominant script of female vulnerability, these narratives are case studies of the ideological construction of Western progress, while adhering to gendered stereotypes which precluded female agency and resistance.

How and to whom are such agencies distributed, and which lives are deemed vulnerable in the first place? How does resistance in vulnerability translate into research on mobility? Vulnerability, particularly in its zones of contact with displacement and migration, shows that vulnerabilities—social, economic, and/or individual—can be both the cause and result of mobilities. In "'It sounds like *erasure*': Mobility, Vulnerability, and Queer Coolitude Poetics in Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut*," Barbara Gfoellner's reading of Mohair's poetry situates vulnerability within the contexts of Indo-Caribbean and queer diasporic im/mobilities to engage with more-than-human vulnerabilities, while exploring "unevenness of vulnerabilities" and their relational potentialities. Gfoellner links the vulnerabilities of human and more-than-human animals during the period of indentureship, arguing against a fixed and predetermined notion of vulnerability. Gfoellner argues that vulnerabilities are instead relational formations containing a multitude of possibilities. Her reading of *The Taxidermist's Cut* suggests a more-than-human poetics, wherein vulnerabilities' relational potentiality is articulated via taxidermy's literal and figurative linkages to violence through both animal skinning and colonial practices.

Martina Koegeler-Abdi's article also takes up questions of relationality and multitudes of vulnerability by exploring the multilayered vulnerability of "children born of war" (CBOW) and identifying the many factors behind a particular form of vulnerability experienced by biracial adoptees in post-WWII Denmark. "'Brown Babies' in Post-WWII Denmark: A Case Study of the Vulnerabilities of Adopted Children Born of War" looks at how children's German heritage shaped their vulnerabilities outside Germany, how this vulnerability interacted with relational vulnerabilities for CBOW adoptees, and finally how these vulnerabilities translate into familial vulnerabilities. The case studies of Regina and Eric highlight the relational and interconnected nature of vulnerability. The article not only locates vulnerability within a historical framework that predates neoliberalism, but it also sheds light on the transnational adoption movement. Finally, Koegeler-Abdi draws attention to intergenerational vulnerability of families involved in these adoption cases, which in itself mitigates and reproduces vulnerabilities.

Racial vulnerability, read through an entangled and relational lens, is the subject of Matthias Klestil's "African American Literature, Racial Vulnerability, and the Anthropocene: Rereading W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in the Twenty-First

Century." In his essay, Klestil brings a Butlerian understanding of "racial vulnerability" into conversation with the Anthropocene. Reading the ecocritical through the lens of racial vulnerability, Klestil extends an invitation for a reinterpretation of the classics and chronicles racial vulnerabilities in the African American literary archive. He also stresses the "resistance potentials" of vulnerability in furthering research on vulnerability and ecocriticism. Such an approach, Klestil argues, benefits Anthropocene scholarship by underlining "the significant role of racial processes in the making and shaping of the new geological epoch."

Taking a literary studies approach to the poetics of precarity, Jennifer A. Reimer's contribution, "From Crisis to Cata/Strophe: Prepositional Poetics as Decolonizing Praxis in Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria* and Raquel Salas Rivera's *while they sleep… under the bed is another country*," draws on scholarly work that contextualizes Butlerian precarity as a process of shared vulnerability filled with political potential. To conceive of vulnerability as an ongoing process invites parallel conversations about the process of coloniality, as implicated in the creation and maintenance of conditions of vulnerability. Taking up these two recent texts by US poets of color, Reimer situates each work within a specific catastrophe exacerbated by climate change-induced Mediterranean migrant crossings and colonial vulnerability as well as Hurricane Maria. Drawing on the work of decolonial critics such as Nelson Maldonado Torres, the essay uses a close critical reading of innovative poetic form to comment on how Girmay and Salas Rivera perform a "countercatastrophic" poetics. In locating innovation within a "prepositional poetics," Reimer shows how poetry enacts visual grammar for re-thinking the operations of power, through time and space, while offering ambivalent sites of shared vulnerabilities as forms of resistance to the colonial/modern world system.

Highlighting the interdisciplinary, intermedial, and cross-genre potentials of vulnerability we have outlined earlier in the introduction, Kosal Khiev, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, and Martina Pfeiler offer a reflection on vulnerability as a productive category for reading poetry and thinking about immigration, incarceration, and performance. In "Performing Vulnerability and Resistance in Spoken Word Poetry," the authors explore the "duality" of "poetry performances as performing vulnerability and resistance within global cultural contexts." The authors trace Khiev's life, which began at a Cambodian refugee camp in Eastern Thailand, in parallel with his spoken word poetry. Through a close reading of Khiev's poetry, the authors interpret vulnerability in an age of systemic racism and discuss vulnerability as a condition of "one's own social environment" as well as its potentials to form resistance, turn into agency, and create counternarratives.

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We believe the work showcased in this special issue defracts current conceptions of vulnerability through the field of American studies to illuminate possible future pathways for critical inquiry. With this work, we extend an invitation to additional conversations and further explorations of the radical potential of narrative resistance in other genres and media. With some of the "sensitive edges" of American studies "surrounded on all sides by depth,"[40] we ask, which new transdisciplinary and collaborative work on vulnerability as resistance might emerge from here on out?

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Notes

1 Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2020).

2 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987), 16.

3 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 71, 75, 74.

4 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 74–75, 116, 118, 122.

5 Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, "Introduction," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

6 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction," 5.

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"Vulnerable as a small pink mouse": Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

Gulsin Ciftci

Abstract

This essay focuses on the productive interactions between vulnerability and trauma theory. Vulnerability indexes trauma's infinitude and recursion as something constantly generative of new emotional, social, and legal injuries. In the novel *A Little Life* (2015), Hanya Yanagihara employs narrative fragmentation, multi-perspectivity, and temporal disarray to evoke trauma's patterns of injury and abjection. Vulnerability's double valence creates affective intensities for readers and establishes a sense of intimacy with the protagonist as he is traumatized. Vulnerability in the novel is linked to closeness, thus, in a dual sense. On the one hand, the protagonist closes himself off from the world. On the other hand, he persists impossibly in fostering intimate relationships. In *A Little Life*, it is this precarious closeness precisely through which vulnerability becomes a form of resistance that foregrounds agency.

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"Vulnerable as a small pink mouse"

Vulnerability, Affect, and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

Gulsin Ciftci

Jude St. James, the protagonist of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015)—a novel frequently described in reviews as indulgence in voyeurism and trauma porn—raises questions about the forms of intimacies and/or the impossibility of telling one's story throughout the narrative. "Someday, he thought, somehow, he would find a way to tell some one, one person. And then he had, someone he had trusted, and that person had died, and he didn't have the fortitude to tell his story ever again. But then, didn't everyone only tell their lives—truly tell their lives—to one person? How often could he really be expected to repeat himself, when with each telling he was stripping the clothes from his skin and the flesh from his bones, until he was as vulnerable as a small pink mouse?"[1] What does it mean to be "as vulnerable as a small pink mouse," or to tell one's story while negotiating the affective dimensions of vulnerability? *A Little Life*, following a character whose story is marked by sexual violence, is a rumination on trauma, vulnerability, and storytelling. Joining elements of many genres, from magical realism to the Bildungsroman, *A Little Life* is a gut-wrenching tour de force: Jude, an orphan raised at a monastery where he was repeatedly abused, was kidnapped by Brother Luke and prostituted to men in hostel rooms. After Brother Luke is arrested, Jude ends up in foster care where he is abused again physically and sexually, and finally abducted by Dr. Traylor, who rapes Jude repeatedly before running him over with a car, leaving him with permanent disabilities.[2] In the novel, this storyline appears intermittently and only when Jude shares fragments of his story, in an attempt to form intimacies with those around him. During and after his time in college, which constitutes the largest part of the narrative, Jude meets people who love and care for him, including Harold, who adopts Jude and assumes a fatherly role. True to dominant trauma narrative form, the novel emphasizes that which comes after the traumatic event.[3] For Jude, this involves self-injuring behavior and struggles with internalized ableism and thoughts of suicide. One of the greatest achievements

of Yanagihara's prose is how she uses the affective dimensions of vulnerability to narrate the protagonist's struggles. Vulnerability becomes a crossing point, thus, where desire mingles with fear, and openness invites potential danger.

Vulnerability, wounds, trauma, and care have become some of the central categories in the study of the contemporary subject since the 1990s, and preoccupations for various disciplines ranging from psychiatry to criminal law, philosophy, politics, economics, and literary studies. Roger Kurtz, in the introduction to *Trauma and Literature* (2008), writes in no uncertain terms that "we live in an age of trauma."[4] In 2014, Marianne Hirsch, another pioneering scholar of trauma studies, defined the era as "vulnerable times."[5] While vulnerability and trauma's concurrently marking the era signals the two's intimate entanglement, a study of such entanglement, taking into consideration especially the affective links that congeal both, remains an uncompleted task. This article thus takes up examining this intricate relationship between trauma and vulnerability while arguing for the importance of reading vulnerability's affective dimensions in trauma narratives, which continuously negotiate paradoxes of openness and closeness, desire and disgust, intimacies and loneliness.

Stepping back from vulnerability as an ontological category or a state of weakness to be overcome, I read vulnerability as a valuable poetic category that encapsulates affects, intensities, and intimacies. Vulnerability is not a mere mode of being-in-the-world. Nor is it encapsulated in bodies alone. We might see it, then, through the discourse of affect—and understood best through relations and intensities that compose it. Indeed, vulnerability attaches to other bodies, entities, matter, and phenomena. Beginning from these premises, I investigate the potentiality of vulnerability in *A Little Life*. By mapping the many spaces, shapes, and forms occupied by vulnerability in the novel, I explore vulnerability as an affective force of narrative worldmaking. On a contextual level, vulnerability thus conjoins plot, characters minor and major, and affective encounters; on the formal level, it sets the affective atmosphere and helps relay the intricacies of trauma narrative beyond the conventional modes and through the threading of intimacies.[6]

To expound on the role of intimacies in mapping vulnerability, it is essential to turn to close-reading and trace the unfolding of vulnerability within and in relation to the text. The traumatized body is the battleground for intimacies—a battleground for vulnerability, abjection, and desires. Whereas the traumatized body is characterized by its close(d)ness to the "outside world" and the potential dangers of intimacies, abjection rather evokes both disgust toward and desire for intimacies. This double valence mimics affects'—and hence vulnerability's—double valence and is productive for exploring relational and embodied experiences. Intimacy, therefore, becomes the central category through which the entanglement of trauma and vulnerability

becomes visible. I trace these intimacies and explore the narrative worldmaking of *A Little Life* in three stages. First, by considering paradoxes such as hope and fear, abjection and desire, I set a particular focus on the many valences that affects possess, and how these valences are portrayed, or established, within the text's formal and contextual layers. Second, to demonstrate vulnerability's centrality in the narrative, I elaborate on the formal devices that establish *narrative vulnerability* and *narrative intimacy*. Third, I map the intersection of trauma and vulnerability as co-actors of the narrative.

Vulnerability and Hope

Through its exploration of the affective dimensions of trauma, *A Little Life* joins forces with both literary trauma discourse and affect theory, both of which have gained increasing currency since the mid-1990s. In *A Little Life*, vulnerability sits at the heart of the relational, affective body, wherein openness, exposure, risk, resistance, hurt, and healing come harmoniously together. Vulnerability courses through life in dynamic forces—simultaneously positive and negative, enabling and disabling. Jude's vulnerability, for instance, is the very reason for his secretive personality; it prevents him from opening up to people. It is, however, this same vulnerability that motivates his attempts to form intimate relationships and overcome this vulnerability. This double valence of vulnerability stands as a helpful example of the relational functions of affect. The vulnerable body makes implications of susceptibility and thus has long been associated with weakness and lack of protection.[7] At the same time, the body is also the point of crossing, where the openness of the body carries in it a positive valence—the knot where it is possible to unlearn and embrace the vulnerabilities.[8]

Such a double valence has been examined in the scholarship of the last three decades, owing to understanding of vulnerability beyond categories like exposure, openness, weakness, and failure.[9] The valence of vulnerability has gone beyond "an already there-ness," and the subject's weaknesses and passivity have come to be seen as dynamic and transformative forces. In their recent works on vulnerability and precariousness, for example, Judith Butler challenges traditional understandings of vulnerability, particularly in politics.[10] Butler sees "vulnerability as a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time."[11] In Butler's account, the vulnerable is not the mere victim that needs to be rescued, but one that has the capacity to act and be acted upon, as well as to affect and be affected.[12] I argue that such a reading of vulnerability parallels the reading of trauma and helps conceptualize vulnerability as an affect. The body becomes the site of struggle, memory, remembering, and working-through; it is a wounded remainder that reminds of the traumatic event.

Scholars of affect and emotion have similarly highlighted vulnerability's positive

valence and creative potentials. Affect theory's attention to the ordinary, ugly, weak, and minor affects make its creative power ever more prominent.[13] Sianne Ngai's study of the cute in "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde" (2005), for example, exemplifies vulnerability's double valence. Ngai argues that cute things might be regarded as vulnerable, for they are assumed to lack agency, while their very vulnerability promises at the same time positive valence through transformation and openness.[14] In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai offers a thorough examination of a set of "minor and generally unprestigious" emotions and draws attention to their particular power, arguing that "literature may in fact be the ideal space to investigate" emotions. While vulnerability is not one of the "ugly feelings" Ngai investigates, her study of "non-cathartic feelings" informs my study of the powerful affective dimensions of vulnerability.[15]

Ugly feelings attached to the narratives of sexual trauma benefit further from Sara Ahmed's suggestion that "when we talk about the displacement between objects of emotion, we also need to consider the circulation of words for emotion." Ahmed underscores the value of openness that is essential to vulnerability: "Vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action. Emotions may involve *readings of such openness*, as spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other."[16] Ahmed's contextualization of openness points at the contacts between bodies, objects, and signs where impressions are made. These contact spaces, the zones of proximity, are filled with potentiality: that is, with openness. Potential danger arrives from the unknowability of this leaking into each other.

This potential danger in openness, as described by Ahmed, is evident in Jude's reflections on his own life. Thinking of his friends' performances of vulnerability through openness, "he could be more like Malcolm, he thinks; he could ask his friends for help, he could be vulnerable around them." When in need of applying cream to his heavily scarred back, he imagines, "he will ask Willem if he could help him with his back." The thought of making himself vulnerable brings his fear to the surface: the fear of arousing disgust. Although Jude knows that "if Willem is disgusted by his appearance, he'll never say anything,"[17] his self-abjection deepens his need to hide his body and remain covered. Jude's imagined openness is made possible only through vulnerability; this openness reduces vulnerability, however, while containing what Sara Ahmed calls "the potential danger."

Hope is central to *A Little Life*'s portrayal of how vulnerability can be a productive force for imagined openness and forming intimate connections. It is multifaceted in the novel: hope for friendships, family, relationships, love, and sex. In *Daring Greatly* (2012), Brené Brown suggests that "we're hardwired for connections"—in *A Little Life*, it is through vulnerability that these connections are motivated.[18] Through-

out the novel, the reader witnesses the intensities of hope, traveling through the characters' bodies, places, and times. Hope "open[s] up a point of contingency in the here and now."[19] Desiring the improbable appears as a fantasy of good life.

"[H]ope must be unconditionally disappointable . . . because it is open in a forward direction, in a future-orientated direction; it does not address itself to that which already exists. For this reason, hope—while actually in a state of suspension—is committed to change rather than repetition, and what is more, incorporates the element of chance, without which there can be nothing new."[20] Hope is part of the ordinary, of what Lauren Berlant calls "a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it means to 'have a life' that adjustment seems like an accomplishment."[21] Jude's story is the story of life-building, in Berlant's terms. It is filled with affective intensities of hope that are so "disappointable" that they motivate suicidal thoughts throughout the novel: Jude hopes to be "normal," to form intimacies with others, to be open, and to be vulnerable. Jude's optimism for—or fantasy of—the existence of normalcy is, perhaps, best described with Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, when they argue that "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming."[22] Jude's self-awareness, however, convinces him of the impossibility of change, of a desirable self.

Jude's ambiguous attachment to the fantasy of a good life is marked by improbability and hope simultaneously. His encounters with others are vulnerable, and his traumatized body's weariness in forming relationships is enhanced. In *A Little Life*, vulnerable encounters showcase a variety of valences. They are both reparative and destructive. Jude's attempts to form intimate relationships with others demonstrate how the affect of vulnerability operates in and through these relationships. While Jude's relationship with each character offers unique insights, some of these intimacies— namely with Willem, Harold, and Caleb—sit at the intersection of trauma and vulnerability and offer therefore a more productive picture of vulnerability for the purposes of this article.

For Jude, building intimacies means allowing himself to be vulnerable by answering questions, sharing his privacy, and trusting others who threaten the borders of his guarded self: "That process—getting to know someone—was always so much more challenging than he remembered . . . He wished, as he often did, that the entire sequence—the divulging of intimacies, the exploring of pasts—could be sped past,

and that he could simply be teleported to the next stage, where the relationship was something soft and pliable and comfortable, where both parties' limits were understood and respected." When being asked questions about himself, "he always felt something cold move across him, as if he were being iced from the inside, his organs and nerves being protected by a sheath of frost." To share is to be "mined" out: "People wanted to know so much, they wanted so many answers," whereas Jude wants to be "left to himself, a blank, faceless prairie under whose yellow surface earthworms and beetles wriggled through the black soil, and chips of bone calcified slowly into stone."[23] Jude uses the image of a prairie to refer to the emptiness and bleakness he sees in himself, and the desire to find oneself in the warm yellow of a prairie is coupled here with the disappointment with what is underneath. His encounters are affective precisely as they portray his vulnerability in the face of the other.[24]

Life-building is a process of learning and unlearning, and Jude's encounters have allowed him to unlearn what his traumatic experiences have taught him in the first place. For Jude, "there was something scary and anxiety-inducing about being in a space where nothing seemed to be forbidden to him, where everything was offered to him and nothing was asked in return." His experiences had shown him that "traditionally, men—adult men, . . . had been interested in him for one reason, and so he had learned to be frightened of them." While "Harold didn't seem to be one of those men," his generous friendship nonetheless "unsettled" Jude.[25] The threatened and shaken borders of his self haunt his consciousness, and "the abject"—that is, intimacies—remains "on the periphery of awareness. The subject finds the abject both repellant and seductive and thus their borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained."[26] The intimacy Harold offers threatens Jude's borders and makes him vulnerable, while Jude's vulnerabilities, simultaneously, take an active part in life-building.

The paradoxical nature of vulnerability and openness precludes Jude's intimacies and exemplifies the potential danger. Jude's inner world—his thoughts, yearnings, desires, the unspoken—is often narrated in great detail, through which the reader witnesses at once Jude's will for and refrainment from vulnerability. Brené Brown underscores the importance of engaging with one's vulnerabilities and argues that vulnerability is "the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences."[27] Ben Anderson similarly argues that "affects are not the special property of any one domain of life," but rather they cut across "separate domains we inhabit."[28] The power of vulnerability is a "catalyst for courage, compassion and connection."[29] While linking the traumatized body—which is closed, isolated, and thus protected—to an understanding of vulnerability that reasserts the openness of the body might seem contradictory, it in fact affirms the potentiality of affects.

The polysemy of closeness in *A Little Life*'s treatment of vulnerability mimics vulnerability's double valence. To protect himself from the pain that seems so easily inflicted on him, Jude "locked anything that could be: doors, windows, closets. It was reflexive for him." Outside his own locked privacy, Jude has the "habit of, upon entering any new room or space, searching for the nearest exit and then standing close to it," to always be prepared for any potential danger.[30] At first sight, Jude's closeness refers to shutting the world out and closing himself off in the face of potential danger, in order to prevent further harm. Such a reading of Jude's closeness fits neatly with a more classical reading through a trauma studies approach, which might argue that trauma results in the subject's alienation, hyperarousal, and avoidance. When considered closely through the lens of vulnerability, however, a second meaning of closeness becomes more evident: closeness as intimacies, closing up to others. Such intimate closeness, paradoxically, would refer back to an openness inherent in it, which is constitutive of vulnerability. While the protagonist shuts himself off from the world around him to protect himself, he also comes close to others to form the intimacies for which he longs. This double valence of "close" is visible only with attention to reading vulnerabilities in traumatized bodies that show themselves in and through intimacies and affects. Such a reading echoes Butler's polyphonic notion of vulnerability as being expressive of oppression—socially and politically induced vulnerability—as well as of agency. As Butler argues, highlighting the importance of vulnerability's double valence, "Once we understand the way that vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone."[31]

Narrative Vulnerability and Narrative Intimacy

A Little Life's dynamic use of temporality, multifocal narrative, and focalization establishes a narrative structure on which vulnerability performs as a co-actor to trauma. Narrative vulnerability is established through the text's formal and aesthetic dimensions, both of which not only play an important role in affective worldmaking in general, but, in this novel specifically, also contribute to forming a vulnerable atmosphere at the narrative level. Acting as an overarching affect that binds content and form, narrative vulnerability is central to my reading of the novel and becomes the first point of inquiry for this analysis.

A Little Life creates a temporal paradox whereby time is at once limited and yet wide-open. This is exemplified in the novel's structural makeup: the novel is divided into seven parts, each with three chapters. The first and last parts of the novel are both titled "Lispenard Street," the name of the street where Jude and Willem live. Lispenard Street is where the narrative begins and marks a landmark for Jude and Willem's relationship, evolving from friendship to love and partnership. The return to

Lispenard Street at the end of the novel, even if metaphorically,[32] indicates a circular narrative temporality. Within the circularity of the narrative, temporal disarray is visible in various other forms, too. The novel speaks to its readers from the eternal present. The time is now, and the moment is at once ephemeral and eternal, while at the same time the present is filled with fragmentary episodes from the past. Then and now, past and present, are fused. *A Little Life* thus forms an affective assemblage of memory. Its tense shifts between past and present effect a temporal chaos, "one of the pillars of the poetics of vulnerability."[33] Such rupture in time mimics Jude's perception of his own being. When Judge Sullivan asks him to sing a song that reveals something about himself, for example, Jude offers Gustav Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," translating the song's first line as "I have become lost to the world,"[34] rather than its typical, "I am lost to the world."

> *I have become lost to the world*
> *In which I otherwise wasted so much time*
> *It means nothing to me*
> *Whether the world believes me dead*
> *I can hardly say anything to refute it*
> *For truly, I am no longer a part of the world.*

The change from the present tense "am" to the present perfect "have become" exemplifies the coalescence of temporalities in *A Little Life*. Jude's past stretches into his present. This shift highlights that it is about neither now ("I am"), nor the past ("I was") alone.[35] Jude, rather, has become lost to the world. Jude's ontological vulnerability might be seen, through Heidegger's account of human existence as oriented toward making sense, as a breakdown in meaning. This experience of *Angst*, a fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*) for Heidegger, implies a connection to what he calls "being-towards-death"—the idea that at any point one's existence may cease, and that thus arises its meaninglessness.[36] The paradoxes of existence and non-existence, and being and not-being, consolidate Jude's vulnerability in the face of the world; he fashions himself an apparition wandering through time unknown.

The narrative spans sixty years, with the zeitgeist rendered invisible in the background of a now saturated with emotion. Indeed, the novel is stripped of any references to any historical events that might allow the reader to locate the narrative temporally. This lack of time markers limits the reader in making narrative associations outside of the person of Jude. The focus on Jude in time—or on Jude as time—results in a more intimate reading experience, whereby the reader is engrossed in the emotional state of the protagonist. In *A Little Life*, time is always equal, always present. The temporal focus is one of the structural affective dimensions of the novel, and the narrative intimacy formed through this focus opens up a contact zone for vulnerability.

Multifocal narration amplifies the temporal disarray of the novel. The narrative is fragmented with flashbacks, memories, and flashforwards. Narrative perspectives, focalization, and narrators shift throughout the story. The novel is narrated by the heterodiegetic omniscient narrator, with the exception of passages narrated in the first person by Jude's former teacher and adoptive father, Harold. These "I" perspectives offer the reader a second viewpoint into Jude's life, but one that is in touch with him. Focalization, however, shifts between the characters. These fragmentations, shifts, and alternations in the narrative draw up an extended portrayal of vulnerability and exemplify the relationality of affects.

Shifting the narrative perspective allows the reader to sway perception away from Jude's inner world and further highlights the degree of his vulnerability. His friends, with whom he has managed to form intimacies, take on the responsibility of care, and the narrative shifts lay bare the conflicts, exhaustion, and helplessness of those who perform care work. The narration of how Jude's vulnerability, in response to the ongoing adoption process, alerts his friends, sheds light onto the inured nature of his weakness to take in the "good things" that are happening to him. "He's sitting at home fucking cutting himself to shreds, he's essentially all scar tissue now, he looks like a fucking skeleton," says Andy to Willem, who calls Jude "every single day" to support him. They create an invisible exoskeleton around Jude: a harmonious, entangled, multi-layered assemblage. "You knew this was going to be hard for him," Andy continues. "You knew the adoption was going to make him feel more vulnerable. So why didn't you put any safeguards in place, Willem? Why aren't your other so-called friends doing anything?"[37] Through such narrative shifts, the reader gets a fuller sense of the intricate nature of vulnerability.

The shifts in focalization connect to minor characters' vulnerabilities and their affective lives at large. Willem's vulnerable connections to his parents, to his disabled brother, and their deaths, for instance, are provided in brief accounts earlier in the chapter, and thus offer the reader a lens through which they can see Willem as an individual tangled up in his own affective relationality. Other characters' guilt, shame, anger, and vulnerabilities create various streams that come together in the novel's affective assemblage, where worldmaking through vulnerability becomes possible. A multifocal perspective highlights the sociality of affect and is useful in showing how one's bodily capacities affect and are affected. Only through a multifocal perspective can the reader trace how the affect of vulnerability travels, attaches to people, pasts and presents, and reattaches through other characters. In the final chapter of the novel, Harold narrates Jude's death to Willem, whose death in a car accident two years prior led to Jude's suicide. Affects that emerged from, and came into being through, Jude's traumatic history float around, navigate through different bodies,

and remain even after his death. The transmission of affects (Brennan) and their stickiness (Ahmed) are seen clearly in Harold's reflections[38]:

> Can you have a real relationship with someone you are frightened of? Of course you can. But he still scared me, because he was the powerful one and I was not: if he killed himself, if he took himself away from me, I knew I would survive, but I knew as well that survival would be a chore; I knew that forever after I would be hunting for explanations, sifting through the past to examine my mistakes. And of course I knew how badly I would miss him, because although there had been trial runs for his eventual departure, I had never been able to get any better at dealing with them, and I was never able to get used to them.[39]

Affects such as fear, melancholy, grief, love, and anger fill Harold's narration with their intensities. However distanced the narrative is from Jude's focalization, the reader experiences the affectivity of Jude's life even without his presence. The affective qualities of Harold's retrospection demonstrate that affects do not exist in themselves but in relation to others, through circulation. As Brennan observes, "Affects have an energetic dimension" and "there is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment.'"[40] This energetic dimension is what allows affects to enhance—through outward projection—or deplete, as in Harold's case, when they are introjected.

Narrative vulnerability, established through formal structures and techniques, works in concert with narrative intimacy. While multi-perspectival focalization and temporal disarray complicate the novel's linearity, the novel closes in on Jude. The narrative's seemingly incongruent and imbricated structure forms an arc over Jude's narrative; the intimacy of the narration intensifies in tandem with Jude's intimacy. As Jude opens up and thus allows himself to be more vulnerable, the narrative's focus concentrates on Jude; it is more detailed and more engaged with his inner world.

The narrative's thickness and affectively charged intensities are established by the narrator's detailed language and attention to affects. The narrator allows access to the memories Jude locked away and testifies to brutal details, even when Jude cannot "find the language" to talk about what happened to him. Jude "literally doesn't have the language . . . His past, his fears, what was done to him, what he has done to himself—they are subjects that can only be discussed in tongues he doesn't speak: Farsi, Urdu, Mandarin, Portuguese."[41] The omniscient narrator becomes Jude's voice and contextualizes Jude's vulnerability. It is through omniscient narration that the reader might go beyond the protective walls around Jude.

Fusing various temporalities, blurring the lines between now and then, increases the affective intensities of the text and the intimacies created. Jude's incapability of sharing his personal life, which at times looks like a stubborn unwillingness, works

in tandem with the narrator's generousness and brutal honesty in sharing those moments with the reader. As if to counter Jude's extraordinary diligence in keeping his self-injury a secret, the narrator offers every bit of detail in a clinical, nearly pornographic way. This narrative style increases the affective quality of Jude's flashbacks from his sexually violated past, evoking visceral reactions in the reader.

Following a protagonist whose characterization is formed around his trauma, secrecy, and privacy, the narrative shifts between what Jude feels comfortable sharing and what he does not. Jude is "too worried about what he might do or say if he lost control over himself," and the reader is often reminded of how much of a "daily effort it took [Jude] to appear normal." Jude perpetually performs. His desire to embody a self other than his own is so strong that the reader glimpses his rare non-performing moments through the omniscient narration. The reader is Jude's shadow. The narrator takes the reader along, following Jude, on some mornings of his almost religiously followed Sunday walks. During these times, before his walks, Jude "would sometimes stand, barefoot, in the kitchen, everything quiet around him, and the small, ugly apartment would feel like a sort of marvel. Here, time was his, and space was his, and every door could be shut, every window locked. He would stand before the tiny hallway closet—an alcove, really, over which they had strung a length of burlap—and admire the stores within it." Here, the reader is intruding into one of Jude's most honest moments, as he is no longer pretending, performing, and controlling. He is content with life and embraces the safety of Lispenard Street: "Those moments alone in the kitchen were something akin to meditative, the only times he found himself truly relaxing, his mind ceasing to scrabble forward, planning in advance the thousands of little deflections and smudgings of truth, of fact, that necessitated his every interaction with the world and its inhabitants." The comfort of being at a trusted place and not having to perform allows Jude to let his guard down and to simply be. Harold's house in Cape Cod has become one of these trusted places for him. In Cape Cod, he also feels safe enough to carry out these meditative moments of non-performance: "In the mornings he woke before the others so he could stand on the back porch alone looking over the sea. *What is going to happen to me?* he asked the sea. *What is happening to me?*"[4.2] Jude's feeling of safety and security is strong enough to keep him from performing in those moments, but these moments open up an equally important aspect of his life—the precarity in which he sees himself. The narrative's attention to these co-existing, yet somewhat opposing, forces is equally visible in Jude's encounters and in the intimate relationships he forms with others. The narrator and the other formal structures of the novel thus permit a sort of personal relationship with the protagonist's inner world, whereas his relationships with others form a broader map of his embodied vulnerability.

Reading Vulnerability in(to) Trauma Narratives

The intricate relationship between narrative intimacy and narrative vulnerability creates a background against which vulnerability's role in trauma narratives becomes ever more visible. How does vulnerability work with, and relate to, trauma narratives, and how does it amplify the narrative's affectivity? To answer these questions, we must look closely at the crossing points of trauma and vulnerability in *A Little Life*. The above close readings of the stylistic elements of the novel's narrative vulnerability make reference to both trauma fiction and classical literary trauma theory. Indeed, the temporal disarray and fragmented narrative of *A Little Life* are prominent stylistic devices across examples of what is called trauma fiction,[43] a genre marker that refers often to a work of literature that represents the emotional and cognitive response to a traumatic event—loss, catastrophe, disasters—experienced on intersecting cultural and individual levels. According to Laurie Vickroy, such narratives "sharpen victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed."[44] Jude's constant dilemma over which parts of his past can be shared and which must be locked away, to prevent his becoming vulnerable, points exactly at this shift.

Navigating through this dilemma, language, or its lack, takes on an essential role, and is another common focal point of recent narrative turns toward vulnerability and trauma. Trauma, according to literary trauma theory, is defined as "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" and is defined by its unspeakability.[45] In the lineage of classical trauma theory, "massive trauma precludes all representation" and "only returns belatedly."[46] Dori Laub elaborates on the unspeakable in relation to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors as

> an imperative to tell and thus come to know one's story . . . Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words, or the right words, there is never enough time, or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech . . . Yet the "not telling" of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The event becomes more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively to invade and contaminate the survivor's daily life.[47]

While Jude's experiences are that of insidious sexual trauma, Laub's description of the unspeakable is evident in Yanagihara's use of language. In *A Little Life*, silence, secrecy, and not-telling originate in Jude's trauma, but they are also essential in narrating his vulnerability. They are, in this case, not necessarily only the result of his vulnerability, but they are also the tools to prevent future vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms against the potential danger: "His silence was both necessity and a protection."[48] Such

a look positions vulnerability on another end of the spectrum concerning trauma, one more about the life-building practices that gesture toward the future rather than the past and its representations.

The final intersection of trauma and vulnerability that I read in *A Little Life* lies in tropes shared across both fields of study, such as self-injury and abjection, which I briefly consider here. The body is central to Yanagihara's narrative. Although Jude desperately attempts to hide his traumatic past by remaining silent and invisible, his body and relationship to it remain nonetheless at the center of the narrative. Self-injury functions as a leitmotif in *A Little Life*. It is not simply a self-inflicted pain. For Jude, rather, cutting is a form of self-punishment—it is a cleansing, a taking back of agency. Jude begins to perform self-harm during his forced prostitution by throwing himself against the walls and down the stairs of the hotel where he was being sold. "Something about the fall, the freshness of the pain had been *restorative*. It was *honest* pain, *clean* pain, a *pain without shame or filth*," thinks Jude. As he was "tossing himself against the brick wall," he imagined "he was knocking out of himself *every piece of dirt*, *every trace of liquid*, every memory of the past few years. He was *resetting* himself; he was returning himself to something *pure*."[49] Jude's affectively charged memories from his past carry the intensities of shame he felt for what he was being forced to do, and how he had developed self-harm as a coping mechanism, a way of cleansing his body from shame and dirt, of purifying. What became a way to establish a self out of abject being results, however, in other vulnerabilities. The mutilated body shatters any sense of normalcy, this time in brutally material form. As the narrator harbors a past that Jude tries to forget and conceal, self-injury for Jude materializes as a method for coping with vulnerabilities: as if self-injury was the only way of "draining away the poison, the filth, the rage inside" that constitutes his vulnerable existence. Through self-injury, "he felt everything within him slow, felt himself relax, felt his memories dim, and had remembered how it helped him." At his moments of extreme vulnerability, he "cuts and cuts and cuts, until finally his breathing slows and he feels the old, comforting *emptiness* settle inside him."[50] Tracing the body to its most secret crevices, the narrative maps an understanding of vulnerability situated in the tradition of traumatic realism.

While acts of self-injury have often been discussed in a pathologizing discourse, a growing vein of research sees agentic power in these practices.[51] Trauma scholarship, linking the wounded mind to the body, has studied the body as a site of trauma and self-injury as a coping mechanism for trauma.[52] *A Little Life*'s skillful play with paradoxes—such as the polysemy of closeness—is also evident in the novel's display of self-injury in ways that negotiate its multiple layers. Following the double valence in vulnerability—that is, posing the question of whether self-injury can be read as a semiotic activity, rather than a mere symptom or coping mechanism—becomes cru-

cial. Particularly in light of trauma scholarship's treatment of the traumatized body itself as text, practices of self-injury may be seen as the act of writing or rewriting that text.

Jude's self-injury and abjection offer a new semiotic realm with which to read the novel. Self-injury is the pre-epistemological act that treats and shapes the body as text that we read from and into the body. This is evident most when Jude is officially adopted by Julia and Harold, Jude's former employer at law school. This unexpectedly pleasant turn marks a return of his self-doubts about being unworthy, and a fear of abandonment. Jude falls into a state of extreme vulnerability, which intensifies his cutting more than ever. Although largely able to control his self-injuring behavior, which is depicted in an attitude that is highly calculated, he loses that sense of control in times when he is most vulnerable.

At moments of extreme vulnerability—when, for example, the body is violated and exploited—self-injury becomes an attempt to take back the agency over the body. It was always others to decide how Jude's body would be used. In response, Jude establishes his agency through what he does to his body. Cutting "made him feel like his body, his life, was truly his and no one else's." His disabling trauma forms Jude's understanding of bodily agency, and, as "he had such little control of his body anyway," his only way of taking control of it was through injuring it.[53]

Vulnerability studies show us how forming intimacies through vulnerable encounters is an activity of life-building. New practices of care, love, and friendships evolve from these encounters, and new meanings are assigned to them. Can overlooking self-harm practices be a form of care? Can silence around self-injury take on a different meaning when utilized to protect the one practicing it? Is it an expression of love? In *A Little Life*, most of Jude's close circle has an implied awareness of his cutting. "Willem had always been very careful not to express too much interest in exploring the many cupboarded cabinet in which Jude had secreted himself," and the others approach these blind spots only through indirection:

> Malcolm had asked, "Have you ever noticed how Jude always wears long sleeves?"
>
> He'd grunted in response. He had, of course—it was difficult not to, especially on hot days—but he had never let himself wonder why. Much of his friendship with Jude, it often seemed, was not letting himself ask the questions he knew he ought to, because he was afraid of the answers.
>
> There had been a silence then . . .
>
> "Flora had a friend who always wore long sleeves," Malcolm continued. "Her name was Maryam. She used to cut herself."
>
> He let the silence pull between them until he imagined he could hear it come alive.[54]

In these instances, conversation is filled with silence and affective knowledge. Silence is no longer a symptomatic necessity for representing trauma; it becomes an act of care and protection. Most importantly, it is the contact zone where vulnerability is felt, even without Jude's presence. Silence takes on an epistemological non-act, where caring for the other is performed through inactivity.

As with self-injury, vulnerability, too, allows for a new perspective on trauma fiction's trope of abject and abjection. Abjection in trauma fiction is often caused by the traumatic event, but it is also commonly used to highlight the possibility of overcoming abjection: the possibilities of intimacies, futures, and desires. Self-abjection caused by the past is narrativized for the signification of the desired future, of life-building. Despite Yanagihara's intent on creating a character who never heals, some things indeed have healed for Jude. Wounds have been cicatrized. Some, on the other hand, like Jude's relationship to sex and physical intimacy, remain still outside of the possible. In his relationship with Willem, sex becomes an abject intimacy for Jude, a "duty." Sex is "his side of the bargain" to be fulfilled and the way to win himself "more time: of Willem's presence."[55] Life-building, then, is not an assemblage of positive affects and affective practices only, but also of compromises, of adaptations, of performances.

While the narrative frequently reminds the reader of how the body, sexuality, and any form of intimacy are abjected in Jude's life—often by himself—it also details Jude's desire to overcome this impediment. He understands the burning desire to have a relationship, and "he doesn't want a relationship for propriety's sake: he wants it because he has realized he is lonely. He is so lonely that he sometimes feels it physically, a sodden clump of dirty laundry pressing against his chest. He cannot unlearn the feeling."[56] As Kristeva delineates in her theory of the abject, "There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded."[57] Jude's acknowledgment of his "flaws" and "deficits" does not stop him from desiring what is abjected due to his trauma. This affectively charged description of Jude's loneliness and his admittance to wanting to be in a relationship brings to the fore his fear of vulnerability: "People make it sound so easy, as if the decision to want it is the most difficult part of the process. But he knows better: being in a relationship would mean exposing himself to someone, . . . it would mean the confrontation of his own body, which he has not seen unclothed in at least a decade—even in the shower he doesn't look at himself."[58]

This simultaneous awareness and abjection of his body fuel Jude's fear, "mak[ing] his stomach fill with something waxy and cold." At the same time, they motivate his attempt at believing in his capacity to be loved. He meets Caleb, who "seems, in that moment, to have been conjured, djinn-like, the offspring of his worst fears and

greatest hopes," a concretized version of his imaginary other, from whom he has been shielding himself. The dilemma, that double valence of vulnerability, is incarnate in this encounter with the embodied other:

> On one side is everything he knows, the patterns of his existence as regular and banal as the steady plink of a dripping faucet, where he is alone but safe, and shielded from everything that could hurt him. On the other side are waves, tumult, rainstorms, excitement: everything he cannot control, everything potentially awful and ecstatic, everything he has lived his adult life trying to avoid, everything whose absence bleeds his life of color. Inside him, the creature hesitates, perching on its hind legs, pawing the air as if feeling for answers.[59]

The narrative lays bare the quotidian negotiations of the subject. Is Jude capable of stepping towards sexual intimacy with Caleb, a corporate lawyer whom he has just met? Does he dare to allow himself to become vulnerable?

> *Don't do it, don't fool yourself, no matter what you tell yourself, you know what you are*, says one voice.
>
> *Take a chance*, says the other voice. *You're lonely. You have to try.* This is the voice he always ignores.
>
> *This may never happen again*, the voice adds, and this stops him.
>
> *It will end badly*, says the first voice, and then both voices fall silent, waiting to see what he will do.
>
> . . . *Be brave*, he tells himself. *Be brave for once.*
>
> And so he looks back at Caleb. "Let's go," he says.[60]

What starts as hope for intimacy adds further injury upon Jude's already shattered being. Unlike any other person Jude has let into his life, Caleb shows no mercy to Jude's vulnerable body. He has an "aversion" to Jude's wheelchair, which he uses when his legs are too weak to carry him: "But—but I can't be around these accessories to weakness, to disease. I just can't. I hate it. It embarrasses me. It makes me feel—not depressed, but furious, like I need to fight against it," Caleb says.[61] He beats, abuses, and rapes Jude when Jude fails to hide his vulnerabilities. Caleb's "aversion" precisely demonstrates what Kristeva theorizes about abjection. Jude's bodily vulnerability becomes abject for Caleb, a reminder of weakness, decomposition, and death.

Fighting back against trauma and abjection, as Yanagihara shows, does not always offer the catharsis. In *A Little Life*, desire and hope are catalysts for overcoming abjection and working through trauma. The protagonist in trauma fiction is "a historical marker to unspeakable experience" as well as "a marker for potential change if healed."[62] This potential is an important aspect that differentiates vulnerability narratives from those of trauma, and precisely where vulnerability studies offers a unique perspective to trauma studies. Going beyond the common temporal spectrum of the trauma novel that emphasizes past and present, a lens through vulnera-

bility gestures rather toward the future—through hope, optimism, and allowing oneself vulnerability, understood each as life-building practices.

Conclusion

Trauma and vulnerability narratives are interconnected through their uses of narrative techniques and tropes, as well as their treatments of language and temporality. While one could argue that these similarities deem vulnerability obsolete, reading through the lens of vulnerability allows the reader to move beyond the limitations of classical trauma fiction. It draws attention to the subject's hopes, desires, and potentiality, without displacing the traumatic event or its reverberations. Attention to vulnerabilities enables trauma fiction to expand through affective reading practices, thereby introducing the richness that affect studies might offer to trauma scholarship at large. *A Little Life* investigates how the body exists not alone but always in relation. The body's relationship to and encounters with other bodies, objects, and places thus influence bodily capacities and potentialities.

Reading vulnerability as an affect opens connections between apparent paradoxes and allows for mapping relations between characters, reader, text, and other things overlooked. In tracing these affective encounters and mapping the affective worldmaking dimensions of the text, vulnerability studies offers a unique point of view. The study of vulnerability demonstrates how a text's affective worldmaking is layered in that text's formal structure and contextual details, as well as within the contact zone of text–reader engagement. The affective nature of the text enhanced with vulnerability's affective dimensions provides a new lens onto the narratives of trauma and the traumatized body. Narrative vulnerability reveals how affects, in contradistinction to their understanding in the Massumian tradition, are neither necessarily unnarratable nor limited to plot and story but are part of the formal structure of narrative. If we understand texts as assemblages, we might bear witness to how affects bind myriad elements, including other affects, that make a narrative.

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Notes

1 Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life* (London: Picador, 2016), 669.

2 For a close reading of the novel through the lens of disability studies, see Dorothee Marx, "'But I'm not even in a Wheelchair': Dis/ability, Im/mobility, and Trauma in Hanya

Yanagihara's *A Little Life*," *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021), DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v3i1.47.

3 See Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) for a detailed study of how contemporary literary texts engage with trauma.

4 J. Roger Kurtz, "Introduction," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

5 See Marianne Hirsch's presidential address to the 2014 MLA Convention, Vulnerable Times: Marianne Hirsch, "Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times," *PMLA* 129, no. 3 (2014), DOI: 10.1632/pmla.2014.129.3.330. Here, "vulnerable times" refers to accumulated and not amended vulnerability more than an issue of temporality.

6 The term "atmosphere" here refers to Sianne Ngai's reading of atmosphere as literary works "organizing quality of feeling." Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 174. For Ngai's use of atmosphere, see particularly pages 47–48, 69, 87, 174, and 243.

7 See, for example, Robert E. Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

8 See Amanda Russell Beattie and Kate Schick, *The Vulnerable Subject: Beyond Rationalism in International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), also for the importance of relationality in vulnerability. For the notion of vulnerability as a condition for good life, see Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

9 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2004); Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, ed., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

10 Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii–xxi.

11 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

12 Butler's account of vulnerability makes references to Baruch Spinoza's early conceptualization of affect, as well as Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the face; see *Precarious Life*, xvii–xx.

13 Feelings, affect, and emotion are used at times interchangeably, and at other times scholars make a clear distinction. See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27; Brian Massumi, "Navigating Movements," interview by Mary Zournazi, in *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's seminal work *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) for different conceptualizations of affect(s). In addition, for the various streams of affect theory mentioned here, see Lauren Berlant, "The Intimate Public Sphere," in *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Routledge, 2009); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007), DOI: 10.1215/00382876-2007-004. Also see Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

14 Sianne Ngai. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 831, DOI: 10.1086/444516.

15 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4, 6–9.

16 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 13, 69.

17 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 257.

18 Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 21.

19 Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 1.

20 Ernst Bloch qtd. in Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 1–2.

21 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

22 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

23 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 121–23.

24 Levinas's work on vulnerability, which highly influenced Butler's theorization of vulnerability, places vulnerability in a more ethical discourse than those of psychology, empathy, and the likes. According to Levinas, "subjectivity is sensibility—an exposure to others—, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the-one-for-the-other." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being; Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 77.

25 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 132, 115.

26 Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

27 Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 21.

28 Anderson, *Encountering Affect*, 6.

29 Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 16.

30 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 78.

31 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.

32 The novel's first and last chapters are titled "Lispenard Street." While the first chapter is mostly set in Lispenard Street and covers the time when Willem and Jude lived together in the small flat they rented on that street, the last chapter covers the time after Willem's death and mainly focuses on Jude's grief. This "return" to Lispenard Street is not so much about the localization of the setting but rather an example of temporal circularity in the novel.

33 Jean-Michel Ganteau, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2018), 169.

34 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 110.

35 Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of time as an *n*-dimensional, non-chronological concept and its non-metrical manifold that is characterized by chaos is insightful in the discussion of temporality in *A Little Life*. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso Books, 1994). Deleuze's philosophy is highly influenced by Henri Bergson's ideas, particularly by the concept of multiplicity, which is fundamental to Deleuze's concept of time and of becomings. Therefore, see also Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Dover Publications, 1913).

36 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).
37 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 226.
38 Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
39 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 708.
40 Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 6.
41 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 105, 299.
42 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 96, 87, 88, 128.
43 See Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), particularly 30–32; Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*; Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
44 Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, 4.
45 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4; Michelle Balaev, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 2 (2008): 151.
46 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 266.
47 Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78–79.
48 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 93.
49 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 418; emphasis added.
50 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 475, 469, 510; emphasis added.
51 For a discussion on self-cutting practices among young adults as an agentic act of reconciling a fraught relationship with the world, see Thomas J. Csordas and Janis H. Jenkins, "Living with a Thousand Cuts: Self-Cutting, Agency, and Mental Illness among Adolescents," *Ethos* 46, no. 2 (2018), DOI: 10.1111/etho.12200.
52 See Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).
53 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 490, 383.
54 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 73, 71.
55 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 486, 485, 489.
56 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 305.
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58 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 305.
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60 Yanagihara, *A Little Life*, 315.
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62 Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival*, xiii.

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On Being Topped

Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Leopold Lippert

Abstract

This article explores the sexual and racial politics of anal vulnerability in Ocean Vuong's 2019 novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. The article shows how the book negotiates the relationship between vulnerability as an embodied relation—configured as forms of bodily receptiveness, permeability, and dependency that necessarily constitute the formal basis of any intersubjective encounter—and vulnerability as a social relation, configured as frameworks of legitimation that differentiate populations in terms of how they encounter, and are affected by, risk, attachment, desire, violence, and physical and mental health. By reading a series of teenage sexual encounters between the Asian American narrator-protagonist Little Dog and Trevor, his white first lover, the article shows that the novel uses anal sensation and metaphoricity to negotiate the vulnerabilities that come with sexual shame and stigma, racial trauma, internalized homophobia, as well as with racialized sexual stereotypes, all the while suggesting ways in which these vulnerabilities may be turned into sources of pleasure, care, reparation, and healing.

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On Being Topped

Vulnerability and Pleasure in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Leopold Lippert

In one of the many uncanny childhood reminiscences gathered in Ocean Vuong's queer coming-of-age novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), the narrator-protagonist Little Dog offers a brief anecdote containing an awkward origin story: speaking for his Vietnamese mother who does not speak English, he assures a startled blond salesclerk at a Sears department store that, despite a skin tone that is much lighter than his own, his mother is indeed his mother. "'No, madam,' I said to the woman in my ESL English, 'That's my mom. I came out her asshole and I love her very much. I am seven. Next year I will be eight."[1] The anecdote's apparent oddness is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, it teaches the young refugee schoolboy how the intricacies of race permeate even the most mundane encounters in the US, as Little Dog's mother almost "passes" for white, only to be racialized anew by her own "garbled" English and easily embarrassed by her seven-year-old who takes over with an English competency only insignificantly higher at the time.[2] Second, the anecdote is also indicative of the novel's larger concern with displacement and language dispossession, misunderstandings, mistranslations, and the yearning for, as Birgit Neumann puts it, "a language that can compensate for the unavailability of the mother tongue and enable forms of belongingness that embrace plurality, openness, and ambiguity."[3] And third, and perhaps most relevant for the concerns of this article, Little Dog's little speech places the asshole where it shouldn't be, biologically and culturally speaking—as the progenitor of new life, rather than as a vehicle and symbol of excess and waste.

This potentially transgressive confusion around the asshole being the birth canal makes "the clerk turn… and clack… away on her heels," and is subsequently explained (away) by the narrator, in retrospect, as a seemingly random example of a cross-cultural misconception concerning sexual shame: Little Dog's mother believed, "like many Vietnamese mothers, that to speak of female genitalia, especially between

mothers and sons, is considered taboo—so when talking about birth, you always mentioned that I had come out of your anus."[4] The incident and its reconfiguration of the mother's anatomy, however, becomes more meaningful when read in the context of the novel's larger concern with the ass, or more precisely, with anal vulnerability and its metaphoric dimensions. As this article will show, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* articulates a significant portion of its racial, sexual, and class politics through the anus, and it does so by connecting the bodily vulnerability of the (sexualized) anus—protected soft tissue, highly receptive nerve endings susceptible to pleasure and pain, or in Little Dog's mother's description of giving birth, "This huge noggin nearly tore up my asshole!"—with the various social and cultural vulnerabilities of the queer refugee protagonist.[5] Through the anus, Vuong's novel articulates a politics of vulnerability that negotiates the relationship between vulnerability as an embodied relation—configured as forms of bodily receptiveness, permeability, and dependency that necessarily constitute the formal basis of any intersubjective encounter—and vulnerability as a social relation, configured as frameworks of legitimation that differentiate populations in terms of how they encounter and are affected by risk, attachment, desire, violence, and physical and mental health.[6] Such a politics of anal vulnerability serves to reconfigure heteronormative, racist, and nationalist conceptualizations of sexuality and belonging, offering an alternative ethics of reciprocity and care to both the Vietnamese refugee protagonist Little Dog and his white working-class lover Trevor.

In what follows, I will read the ways in which *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* attaches social and cultural meaning to certain bodily vulnerabilities organized around anal experience. This focus on the anus and its politics of vulnerability contributes to already existing scholarship on Vuong's novel (as well as on his previous, similarly-themed poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* [2016]) a specific perspective on the racialization of sexuality in the context of the Vietnamese American refugee experience.[7] In particular, I will focus on a series of teenage sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, his white first lover, who was, in the first-person narrator's perception, "raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity."[8] These encounters use anal sensation and metaphoricity to negotiate the vulnerabilities that come with sexual shame and stigma, racial trauma, internalized homophobia, as well as racialized sexual stereotypes, all the while suggesting ways in which these vulnerabilities may be turned into sources of pleasure, care, reparation, and healing. Hence, the notion of vulnerability takes up a dialectic meaning here: a potentially destructive condition that may at the same time engender constructive practices of care. By describing the complex sensual experiences connected to the ass in the interracial sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* engages with that dialectic: the novel rewrites common heteronormative

and white-privileged understandings of anality and instead foregrounds a transgressive conceptualization of the anus and its associated vulnerabilities. In the process, Vuong's transgressive politics of anal vulnerability not only reconfigures dominant understandings of sexuality and kinship structures but also rewrites prominent cultural narratives of generational trauma and the Western "industries of memory" that have accrued around the US war in Vietnam and the figure of the Vietnamese refugee.[9]

Vulnerability and the Asian Ass

How can we conceptualize the bodily vulnerability of the anus negotiated in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and of the sexualized and racialized anus in particular? Judith Butler positions the physical receptiveness and interdependency of the human body at the center of the social, economic, and political vulnerability of individuals and communities. To better grasp this connection, Butler suggests "letting go of the body as a 'unit' in order to understand one's boundaries as relational and social predicaments: including sources of joy, susceptibility to violence, sensitivity to heat and cold, tentacular yearnings for food, sociality, and sexuality."[10] For Butler, it is the fundamental openness and relationality of the body that makes it vulnerable to all kinds of social and political forces, and such vulnerability can become potentially damaging if it is exploited by others, if it is confronted with hostility or violence. Vulnerability is thus accompanied by a considerable amount of risk that needs to be mitigated, and to achieve such mitigation, Butler proposes an ethics of non-violence inspired by Emmanuel Levinas. In Butler's reading of Levinas, the other's "face" serves as a literal and metaphorical marker of vulnerability's paradox, as it "at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from acting upon it."[11] If we encounter the other's face, then, we recognize its fundamental vulnerability, its invitation to respond violently, but we manage to turn that invitation down. By looking at the face and acknowledging its very openness, Butler suggests, we can resist the temptation to confront the other with antisocial violence, and instead acknowledge vulnerability as a common characteristic not only of our embodied selves but also of our social and political lives.

Importantly, however, in Vuong's novel, the paradox of vulnerability is not negotiated via the face but is more closely connected to the anus. And while the face appears to be theorized as a quasi-universal marker of humanity, the anus (and its vulnerability) in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is always already informed by dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality. Hence, to understand the bodily vulnerabilities and their possible violent temptations in the sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor, we need to elaborate on the *particular* vulnerabilities of gay interracial anal erotics and look at the ways in which they reflect on the cultural and social vulnerabilities of the displaced Asian American queer protagonist. Jonathan Kemp's study

of *The Penetrated Male* (2013) is quite helpful in this regard: Kemp details the mostly negative correlations between heteronormative masculinity and (anal) openness or penetrability, arguing that "our traditional understanding of the penetrated male body" is characterized by "taboos not only against anality and anal intercourse, but, by extension, against so-called passivity and powerlessness."[12] For Kemp, the vulnerability of the anus has a specific gender politics, as it has traditionally served to distinguish a "non-penetrable" form of hard masculinity associated with power and dominance from "vulnerable" forms of masculinity that are softer and more receptive, but which are also typically read as emasculated and powerless. This binary gender politics of the anus is further complicated by its politics of sexuality, as especially in the context of gay male sexuality and the lingering shadow of the AIDS crisis, anal vulnerability has been associated with illness, death, and (symbolic) murder and, thus, with the very antisocial violence that Butler's ethics tries to eschew.[13] While the cultural association of gay male anality with antisocial negativity is prominent both as a homophobic trope and as a strategy for queer resistance,[14] there has also emerged a different, almost antithetical strain of theorizing anal vulnerability, associated with Guy Hocquenghem or Christian Maurel. For these theorists, the fact that "the anus is excluded from the social field" of a phallic "jealousy-competition system" makes it possible to (re)claim the anus as a site of desire and pleasure that defies sexual categorization and identitarian logics, as well as the active-passive distinction that undergirds the politics of masculinity outlined above.[15] (Or as Maurel summarizes, "Active, passive, old bullshit. . . . But to be sodomized is only passive for those who, having never been sodomized, have never felt what effervescent anal *activity* is."[16])

It is important to keep the potential of such an egalitarian and polymorphous understanding of anal sexuality in mind, for it serves as an implicit point of reference for the politics of vulnerability espoused by *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. However, this politics needs to be purposely articulated against a racialized logic of sexual roles that in fact fixes the very "old bullshit" Maurel attempts to undo in his vision of (gay) sexual pleasure.[17] The sexual encounters between Little Dog and Trevor are always already racialized by a cultural assumption that typecasts Asian (American) gay men as "bottoms"—as receptive and therefore seemingly passive partners in anal sex. This practice of racialization not only operates within a larger context of racist fetishization, which Leslie Bow calls "racist love,"[18] but also elides the specific Vietnamese American refugee identity of Little Dog into a more general passivized Asianness. As several Asian American studies scholars have pointed out, the typecasting of Asian "bottoms" (and conversely, white "tops") is related to (neo)colonial "narratives of penile privilege" that associate Asian men with softness, effeminacy, passivity, and a more general social and cultural powerlessness related to the (neo) colonial racialization of Asians and Asian Americans alike.[19] According to this logic,

a racialized fantasy of dominance and submission is grafted onto a polarized conceptualization of sexual roles and practices, thereby valorizing certain masculinities ("hard," "dominant," "white") and sexual positions ("top," "penetrating," "active") while disparaging others. In the process, the bodily permeability and openness that lies at the center of an ethics of non-violence is solidified here—vulnerability ceases to be a common element of human encounters and instead becomes culturally and racially specific—and its burden of risk, the violent threat that penetration symbolizes, is placed onto the Asian ass exclusively.

Analyzing this hegemonic conjunction of race, sexuality, and power, Nguyen Tan Hoang identifies a problematic double bind for Asian American men, such as Vuong's narrator-protagonist, and their understanding of selfhood: if bottomhood is seen as racialized emasculation in white-privileged cultural contexts, then Asian American men often (have to) resort to questionable "strateg[ies] of remasculinization" that are achieved "at the cost of marginalizing femininity and feminine embodiment."[20] Instead of short-circuiting bottomhood, emasculation, and powerlessness, Nguyen suggests a different cultural strategy: Insisting that the power im/balances between "top" and "bottom" roles are much more complex than a binary active/passive distinction, he suggests "adopting a view from the bottom." Such a perspective, albeit articulated out of a specific theory of gay male sexuality, is surprisingly close to Butler's broader ethics of non-violence, as it "reveals an inescapable exposure, vulnerability, and receptiveness in our reaching out to other people."[21] For Nguyen, a resignification of bottomhood is ethically necessary, one that highlights not only the fundamentally reciprocal nature of sexual encounters but also acknowledges the common vulnerabilities that lie at the heart of any encounter, sexual or otherwise. Such a resignification would also reconfigure the racialized underpinnings of anal sexuality specifically and bodily vulnerability more broadly, as it grates against a heterosexist and white-privileged identitarian logic that inflexibly fuses race with gender and sexual identity (and that identifies Asianness with effeminacy and bottomhood exclusively). Hence, Nguyen suggests leaving "the refuge of heteronormativity" and asks "what other routes are possible for thinking about gay Asian American bottomhood that would accord pleasure and agency (and, at times, a thrilling surrender of power and agency)?"[22] In the following, I will examine how *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* explores these *other routes*, using the anus as a marker for an ethics of vulnerability, social relationality, and pleasure, while at the same time eschewing the racist and heteronormative preconceptions that place the burdens of vulnerability on some identity positions more so than others.

Cracking Up, Cracking Open

In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the anal politics of vulnerability come to the forefront when the first-person narrator Little Dog, aged fourteen, meets Trevor, the grandson of his employer, at a tobacco farm, and they start a fraught but intense love relationship, the only love relationship featured in the narrator's recapitulations to his mother. At this point in the novel, the relationship between Little Dog and his biological family, in particular his mother and grandmother with whom he lives in Hartford, Connecticut, has been well established, and the initial encounter with Trevor is embedded into a larger extension of kinship formations beyond blood relations. In developing the narrative this way, the novel follows an established pattern of queer Asian North American fiction, which, as Stephen Hong Sohn argues, typically features "*survival plots* that significantly involve queer Asian North American characters as storytellers" and "a set of individuals (and entities) who are not necessarily biologically related to him or her and who together create an *inscrutable belonging*."[23] In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, this larger set of individuals is represented by the Spanish-speaking, undocumented migrant laborers at a tobacco farm outside Hartford, where Little Dog starts to work during the summer to earn his own money. Away from "family," Little Dog finds new forms of belonging and sociality through the men he works with, an experience that proves restorative:

> But the work somehow sutured a fracture inside me. A work of unbreakable links and collaboration, each plant cut, picked, lifted, and carried from one container to another in such timely harmony that no stalk of tobacco, once taken from the soil, ever touches ground again. A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations.[24]

Through hard physical labor, Little Dog is connected to the other workers—and that connection is based on a concrete bodily vulnerability, as the bodies of the male farmhands need to be open in order to communicate and collaborate—they need to be aligned to be productive. Given the language barrier, communication is not linguistic but based on a shared sense of bodily interdependency, on "smiles" or "hand gestures" or "hesitations." This emphasis on immediate sociality across racial and linguistic differences is noteworthy also because Vuong's narrative here dismisses a prominent racist script, namely that of "Asian American asociality, a mode of racial performativity that navigates the processes by which Asian Americans have been racially figured as a problem for and of sociality, as assimilated yet socially isolated, unrelatable subjects."[25] Instead of dwelling on racialized asociality, Vuong emphasizes the context of economic exploitation in which these men work. Embedded in such a context, the bodily interdependencies described above are also reflective of the social, economic, and legal vulnerabilities of the mostly undocumented laborers: they

need to be productive so that their legal status is not undermined; they need to put to work their bodily vulnerabilities so that their social and economic vulnerabilities are not betrayed.

For Little Dog, the situation is somewhat less threatening. To be sure, picking tobacco is a summer job that provides respite from a family constellation shaped by generational war trauma, but unlike his coworkers, he is in no immediate danger of being deported. Rather, the work experience offers a way for him to assert adolescent self-sustainability in the face of the quotidian racial and socioeconomic dispossession the novel chronicles. It is through this adolescent self-assertion that Little Dog initially bonds with Trevor, who comes to work at his grandfather's tobacco farm because he wants to escape his abusive father, whom he "fucking hate[s]."[26] Although Trevor enjoys certain privileges associated with whiteness that Little Dog does not, the narrator still acknowledges the shared insecurities of growing up and hating one's parents—and learns a surprising lesson about intersectional vulnerability: "Up until then," Little Dog recounts, "I didn't think a white boy could hate anything about his life."[27] While racially and socioeconomically different, Little Dog and Trevor are narratively paired, as teenagers in a shared coming-of-age experience.

Over the following months, the two protagonists develop a physical relationship that might be characterized as "inscrutable belonging," as it is never explicated on the basis of identity categories, as "gay" or perhaps "interracial," but as a deepening sequence of intimate sensations and longings, of a "sound almost like pleasure" or a "tongue tracing my ear"—yet also of shame and silence. Their initial genital sexual encounters take place as what they call "fake fucking," a practice of mock penetration, or as the narrator describes it, "a penis in a fist in place of the inner self, for a moment it *was* real."[28] The repeated description of these "fake" encounters as an integral part of Trevor and Little Dog's relationship sheds initial light on the novel's politics of anal vulnerability. On the one hand, the anus seems to be considered so vulnerable by both protagonists that its actual penetration seems to be out of the question, a form of bodily violence that they shy away from. While they do desire to fuck, as a form of shared intimacy and pleasure, and even mimick penetrative movements, the anus itself is never involved in these practices—its presence is performatively invoked, but paradoxically, its bodily materiality remains imaginary. On the other hand, despite the make-believe penetration, the racial politics of anal vulnerability are already firmly in place, as Little Dog's sexual role is, without any explicit discussion, framed as submissive, or "bottom." He is the one being topped, even if penetration is only fake.

That this anal vulnerability corresponds with the cultural vulnerability of the Asian queer is clear to Little Dog, whose narratorial voice immediately links bottomhood

with cultural and social marginalization—what at first was "fucking" becomes "to be fucked up" in the process, with the promise of at least some form of agency being associated with being bottom: "'Keep going,' I begged. 'Fuck me up, fuck me up.' By then, violence was already mundane to me, was what I knew, ultimately, of love. Fuck. Me. Up. It felt good to name what was already happening to me all my life. I was being fucked up, at last, by choice."[29]

In the scene, Little Dog's everyday experiences of racial dispossession and generational war trauma become externalized in the fake anal sexual act, and sexual pleasure is linked to an obscure agency derived from the ability to at least *name* the vulnerability associated with that dispossession. Little Dog has an immediate grasp of how his social and sexual vulnerabilities are connected, and he is willing to play along, offering up his fake anal vulnerability to be exploited since that pacifying strategy has worked in an everyday life in which he has learned to always apologize first. Trevor, respectively, seems equally aware of the racialized distribution of vulnerability that cuts across their relationship, as he refuses to be (fake) topped by Little Dog, citing established tropes of emasculation and powerlessness, thereby reenacting rather than questioning the racialized top/bottom division. As the narrator recounts their sole attempt at switching sexual roles: "Then, one afternoon, out of nowhere, Trevor asked me to top him . . . But it was over before it began. Before my tip brushed his greased palm, he tensed, his back a wall. He pushed me back, sat up. 'Fuck.' He started straight ahead . . . 'I dunno. I don't wanna feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—' He paused, wiped his nose. 'It's for you. Right?'"[30] On the verge of being topped himself, Trevor cannot break free from the entrenched gender politics of hard masculinity, in which being "bottom" is associated with being "weak" or with vulnerable femininity. In his version of internalized homophobia, men are only read as being gay once they allow themselves to be penetrated, once they offer their bodily vulnerability to shared sexual pleasure. According to this logic, Trevor's "straight" masculinity remains intact as long as he is in the "top" position. As this logic is conveniently racialized, and sexual vulnerability is cast as "Asian" as well as "gay," Trevor is "allowed" to engage in interracial homosexual sex without ever having to question the boundaries of straight white masculinity. For Trevor, then, having sex, even if it is gay sex, is about affirming established heteronormative identity markers rather than making oneself vulnerable to a situation of potential pleasure. For Little Dog, this is a disappointment hard to bear: "I had thought sex was to breach new ground, despite terror, that as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply. But I was wrong. The rules, they were already inside us."[31]

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, however, does not dwell on such disappointment, but instead makes the intransigent sexual and racial politics of its setup a starting point for a resignification of the various vulnerabilities of its protagonists. Most

prominently, this is achieved through Little Dog's attempt, already alluded to above, to reframe bottomhood in active, agential terms rather than as passive endurance, a reframing that would also destabilize the racialized top/bottom division that characterizes not only the relationship of Little Dog and Trevor but also the perceptions of gay Asian masculinity more broadly. This division, Nguyen points out, does not hold anyway, and sexual dynamics are typically more reciprocal or more complicated: "Although dominant perceptions of top-bottom roles understand the top as dominant and active and the bottom as submissive and passive, the power dynamics between the two positions are much more multifaceted."[32] Vuong has Little Dog articulate a similar dialectics, as he gradually discovers that there is potential agency in *any* sexual role, as long as one actively embraces it: "Because submission, I soon learned, was also a kind of power. To be inside of pleasure, Trevor needed me. I had a choice, a craft, whether he ascends or falls depends on my willingness to make room for him, for you cannot rise without having something to rise over."[33]

As Little Dog comes to realize, bottomhood may serve as a way to assert a sense of control in sexual encounters and at the same time represent an ambivalent "mode of accessing sexual and social legibility" for the Asian American queer.[34] What is more, there is pleasure to be gained from that assertion, not only for Little Dog himself but also for Trevor, whose sexual pleasure is dependent on Little Dog's conscious choice to embrace his racialized bodily vulnerability, and by extension, the cultural and social vulnerabilities associated with it. Accordingly, the "inside" that is commonly framed as part of the inside/outside binary of physical penetrability, and which fixes the Asian American bottom as the one whose "inside" is being violated, is here reconfigured as an "inside" of pleasure itself. Vulnerability, in turn, is not primarily understood as a precondition to physical penetrability or even racial dispossession, but as the active willingness to open up and share pleasure with one's sexual partner, regardless of the particular social and sexual position one holds: while the "fucking" is still fake, the alignment of vulnerability with pleasure—and its potential to be enabling and restorative rather than hurtful—is not.

The emphasis on letting oneself be vulnerable in order to share pleasure is also extended to the nonsexual dimensions of Trevor and Little Dog's relationship, and perhaps can be read as a more overarching ethics of living with one another across (racial) differences. Vuong gives a poignant and semantically rich example of such an ethics in a short scene where Little Dog and Trevor laze around in a barn at the tobacco farm after they kissed intimately, listening to radio commercials during a Patriots game. Trevor's sudden existential question, "Why was I even born, Little Dog?" remains significantly unanswered, and both protagonists instead respond to a KFC commercial, professing their hatred for the brand. It is unclear what exactly it is about the situation that they find funny, perhaps the incongruence between the

solemn Trevor and the trivial ad, but immediately, they both start laughing. "And we cracked up. We cracked open. We fell apart like that, laughing."[35] The laughter is reparative, as Trevor's existential desperation is turned into a form of vulnerability that does not hurt, but one which instead offers the promise of communion and pleasure. As narrator, Little Dog reiterates the figure of speech that describes laughter as an involuntary bodily response—*cracking up*—as the more definite *cracking open*, a mode of making oneself vulnerable to the other to experience the sheer joy of laughing together. The implicit answer to Trevor's question as to why he was even born, *to fall apart laughing*, describes a veritable ethics of vulnerability, in the sense that he and Little Dog need to give up control over the metaphorical and conceptual coherence of their bodies in order to laugh, in order to engage with one another pleasurably. Finally, Vuong's decision to describe laughing specifically as *cracking up/cracking open* engages a larger semantic field that encompasses both the anus (via the *ass crack* that can be cracked open as well) and the larger bodily and social vulnerability that will become central to Trevor's character in the course of the novel: his drug addiction, a long-term effect of an opioid prescription he received for a broken ankle at age fifteen. In the final section of this article, I will turn to this latter dimension of vulnerability in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a dimension that shifts vulnerability's central promise from pleasure to care.

Baptized by Pure Need

The last and perhaps thickest description of anality and anal vulnerability is part of a retrospective narration following Trevor's death from a heroin overdose. By the time Little Dog learns of Trevor's death, more than five years after they first met, they have lost contact, as Little Dog has left Hartford for New York City to attend "a city college in Brooklyn." While there are gaps in the narrative concerning the five-year span, the implication is that Little Dog's upward social mobility has estranged the teenage lovers from one another, which is why Little Dog only learns about Trevor's death through a Facebook comment that Trevor's father posted in his son's account, simply stating, "I'm broken in two." As Little Dog leaves New York for Hartford on the train, he ponders that phrase, and eventually comes up with a more precise one: "*Into—yes*, that's more like it. As in, *Now I'm broken into*."[36] As he mentally rewrites the Facebook post, Little Dog uses by now familiar notions of physical penetrability and the threat of violence in order to describe the broader vulnerabilities created by a malfunctioning healthcare and social system. While Trevor did not let Little Dog *break into* him pleasurably, through teenage anal sex (fake or not), he is eventually *broken into* by a drug addiction that has clear social causes and class implications. Trevor may have been able to mobilize both his own hard white masculinity and Little Dog's racialized vulnerability to prevent himself from being broken into in the first

instance, but he cannot prevent his eventual vulnerability to opioid addiction, facilitated by his class and socioeconomic background.

As Trevor is broken into by an overdose, Little Dog's grandmother Lan is dying from cancer, likely a late effect of the chemical toxicity she was exposed to during the US war in Vietnam. The narrative alignment of the two different kinship structures that have shaped Little Dog's coming-of-age is further complicated by an extended memory of anal sex woven into these narratives of death, decay, and family. As Little Dog watches over the cancer-ridden body of his grandmother, he remembers the first time he and Trevor actually had sex, "not with his cock in my palm like we usually did, but for real." This memory takes him back to the barn on the tobacco farm, and to a seemingly innocent time with Trevor, "before . . . the ambulance, the hospital room, the heroin hot in Trevor's veins. Before he would come out of the hospital, clean for a whole three months before hitting it again."[37] But while the memory, and its particular emplacement in the narrative, might easily have worked as a reiteration of the homophobic trope that associates anal sex with death and decay (of Trevor, of Little Dog's grandmother), Vuong takes the scene into a different direction. At first, the sensation of simultaneous pain and pleasure that Little Dog experiences in the bottom position is described in visceral detail, tracing the subtle shifts that turn the discomforts of anal receptivity (not fake this time) into enjoyment. As he revisits the memory, Little Dog recounts an unexpected learning experience: "The sparks in my head bloomed with each thrust. After a while, the pain melted into a strange ache, a weightless numbness that swept through me like a new, even warmer season. The feeling brought on, not by tenderness, as from caress, but by the body having no choice but to accommodate pain by dulling it into an impossible, radiating pleasure. Getting fucked in the ass felt good, I learned, when you outlast your own hurt."[38] The sensation of pleasurable pain caused by physical penetration is reminiscent of the initial evocation of the anus in the novel, in the *fake anal* pain Little Dog's mother experienced when she gave birth to him. And like in this earlier instance, the pain creates a familial bond, this time, however, not between mother and son, but an *inscrutable belonging* between Trevor and Little Dog that becomes a form of kinship, too, "as if we were two people mining one body, and in doing so, merged, until no corner was left saying *I*."[39]

The bliss of interracial bonding through anal vulnerability is short-lived, however, as the *real* fucking soon excavates feces from Little Dog's ass, thereby curiously materializing Butler's ethical proposition *to let go of the body as a unit*. What's more, the sudden appearance of feces, as a result of anal sex, complicates Leo Bersani's psychoanalytic model of penetration, in which the "taking in/expelling rhythm" produces a dynamic in which the "momentary losing of what is being received is the condition for the pleasure of the reception."[40] In Little Dog's case, losing is not momentary,

and the loss is not eventually turned into the pleasure of reception, but is instead imbued with shame and the fear of retribution on Trevor's part. By staining Trevor's penis with shit, Little Dog destroys the convenient (if merely symbolic) heterosexuality Trevor has managed to maintain by racializing sexual positions and roles. Little Dog has made himself vulnerable; consequently, he fears the reactivation of Trevor's internalized homophobia and physical violence as a form of atonement, since "I had tainted him with my faggotry, the filthiness of our act exposed by my body's failure to contain itself."[41] Trevor, however, decides otherwise, and turns Little Dog's vulnerable anus into a site of care; he leads Little Dog out of the barn to the river and helps him wash himself clean in the quiet darkness of the night. The cleansing becomes a ritualized form of caregiving, a mutual acceptance of bodily vulnerability and shame. Even more so, this unpredicted scene of care is concluded with a reparative gesture that links care back to pleasure again: Trevor kneels down and begins to lick Little Dog's ass in a healing ritual that not only acknowledges—with Butler and Levinas—(anal) vulnerability as a common characteristic of our embodied and social selves but which, for Little Dog, also *feels good*: "I shook—his tongue so impossibly warm compared to the cold water, the sudden, wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn. It felt like an appalling second chance, to be wanted again, in this way . . . Although this was not the first time he did this, it was the only time the act gained new, concussive power. I was devoured, it seemed, not by a person, a Trevor, so much as by desire itself. To be reclaimed by that want, to be baptized by its pure need. That's what I was."[42]

The scene and its ethics of care rewrite the racist and heteronormative politics of anal vulnerability, instead offering reparation in the form of a stylized baptism. Importantly, however, this baptism does not eschew the sexual: rather than cleansing and thereby excising the "filthiness" (according to a prominent homophobic script) of especially anal sexuality, the scene re-introduces anality into the very act of purification.[43] Instead of being cleansed *from* pleasure, Little Dog is cleansed *through* pleasure, "devoured," in his recollection, "by desire itself." The phrase echoes Little Dog's earlier description of bottomhood, which enabled Trevor to be "inside of pleasure," only that this time the (racialized) roles are reversed, and it is Trevor who offers pleasure to Little Dog.[44] Through a sexual baptism that provides both reparation and pleasure to the racialized queer protagonist, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* thus suggests a more encompassing understanding of what the anus and anal vulnerability can achieve culturally. Rather than subscribing to a heterosexist and racist logic according to which the Asian queer is made structurally vulnerable by being typecast as subservient "bottom"; rather than introducing and enacting racial and sexual hierarchies of vulnerability, the novel articulates a politics of shared vulnerability that transforms established protocols of relationality, pleasure, and care.

Conclusion

In the foregoing article, I analyzed the racial and sexual politics of anal vulnerability in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. By exploring the interrelations between vulnerability as an embodied relation—particularly with respect to the anus—and vulnerability as a social form with racialized and sexualized dimensions, I have shown that the novel articulates an ethics of vulnerability based on a polymorphous and egalitarian understanding of anal sexuality. By reading several scenes concerned with the sexual and sensual relationship between the Asian American protagonist Little Dog and his white lover Trevor, I have highlighted the ways in which the novel deploys anality to negotiate sexual shame, racial stereotyping, and generational trauma, all the while finding ways to avoid the racist and heteronormative dynamics that would otherwise only associate bodily and social vulnerability with specific identity positions. Instead, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* rewrites common heteronormative and white-privileged understandings of anality, thus offering agency, pleasure, and care to both Little Dog and Trevor, despite and across their various vulnerabilities.

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Notes

1 Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 52.

2 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

3 Birgit Neumann, "'Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan': The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," *Anglia* 138, no. 2 (2020): 295, DOI: 10.1515/ang-2020-0023.

4 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

5 Vuong, *On Earth*, 52.

6 For recent scholarship on the unequal distribution of vulnerability and precarity, see, for example, Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Catherine S. Ramírez, Sylvanna M. Falcón, Juan Poblete, Steven C. McKey, and Felicity Amaya Schaeffer, ed., *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Noncitizenship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

7 See, for example, Summer Kim Lee, "Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality," *Social Text* 37, no. 1 (2019), DOI: 10.1215/01642472-7286252; Kelly Nguyen,

"Queering Telemachus: Ocean Vuong, Postmemories, and the Vietnam War," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, no. 29 (2022), DOI: 10.1007/s12138-021-00605-3; Christina Slopek, "Queer Masculinities: Gender Roles, the Abject, and Bottomhood in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*," *Anglia* 139, no. 4 (2021), DOI: 10.1515/ang-2021-0057; Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2016).

8 Vuong, *On Earth*, 203.

9 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 14. Nguyen suggests that the US military-industrial complex manufactures industrial memory with respect to the US war in Vietnam that goes beyond the creation of mere spectacular value. He argues that the "military-industrial complex does so not simply or only through a memory industry based on the selling of baubles, vacations, heritages, or entertainment. The memory industry produces kitsch, sentimentality, and spectacle, but industries of memory exploit memory as a strategic resource." Nguyen, *Nothing*, 14–15. Along similar lines as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Yen Le Espiritu suggests that for the industrial manufacture of memory around the US war in Vietnam, the figure of the "freed and reformed Vietnamese [refugee]" has been crucial, as it "has been key to the (re)cuperation of American identities and the shoring up of U.S. militarism in the post-Vietnam War era." Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1–2.

10 Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 45.

11 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004), 135.

12 Jonathan Kemp, *The Penetrated Male* (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 1.

13 For the classic reading of anal sexual politics in the context of the AIDS crisis, see Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave," *October*, no. 43 (1987), DOI: 10.2307/3397574.

14 See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

15 Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 103, 105.

16 Christian Maurel [Guy Hocquenghem], *The Screwball Asses* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2010), 49. This text was published under Guy Hocquenghem's name but has since been attributed to Christian Maurel.

17 While not concerned with Asian masculinities, Maurel's intervention is partly also directed against a racist sexual logic, namely one that fetishizes the "Arab man" as a virile penetrator. See Maurel, *Screwball*, 9–12.

18 Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 1.

19 David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 1. As performance scholar Eng-Beng Lim points out, this racial-sexual typecasting can also be read as "theatrical conceit or performance in(ter)vention" that may undermine the very (neo)colonial fantasies on which it is based. Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spellbinding Performance in the Asias* (New York: New York

University Press, 2014), 19. See also Thomas Xavier Sarimento, "PhilippinExcess: Cunanan, Criss, Queerness, Multiraciality, Midwesternness, and the Cultural Politics of Legibility," in *Q&A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan IV, Alica Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021).

20 Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View From the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

21 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 2.

22 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 19.

23 Stephen Hong Sohn, *Inscrutable Belongings: Queer Asian North American Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 22–23.

24 Vuong, *On Earth*, 90–91.

25 Lee, "Staying In," 29.

26 Vuong, *On Earth*, 97.

27 Vuong, *On Earth*, 97.

28 Vuong, *On Earth*, 105, 106, 119, 114.

29 Vuong, *On Earth*, 119.

30 Vuong, *On Earth*, 119-20.

31 Vuong, *On Earth*, 120.

32 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 7.

33 Vuong, *On Earth*, 118.

34 Nguyen, *Bottom*, 15.

35 Vuong, *On Earth*, 108.

36 Vuong, *On Earth*, 166–67.

37 Vuong, *On Earth*, 199–200.

38 Vuong, *On Earth*, 202.

39 Vuong, *On Earth*, 202.

40 Leo Bersani, *Receptive Bodies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 87.

41 Vuong, *On Earth*, 203.

42 Vuong, *On Earth*, 205–206.

43 In her incisive reading of the novel, Christina Slopek interprets the cleansing scene in terms of a compensation of abjection: the initial "undesired abject dimension" (the feces) is compensated via another abject (the ass-licking), creating an "ambiguous corporeality" in the process. My point here is rather that there is genuine pleasure to be gained from re-introducing anal vulnerability—a pleasure that goes beyond the functional logics of mere compensation. See Slopek, "Queer Masculinities," 753.

44 Vuong, *On Earth*, 206, 118.

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Suffragists and Russian Suffering

Vulnerability in Early Progressive US Movements

Katharina Wiedlack

Abstract

This article analyzes American pro-Russian revolutionary newspaper and magazine articles, biographies, political speeches, poems, etc. between roughly 1880 and 1917. It asks what strategies American social progressives, including suffragists and feminists, developed to create empathy for the Russian revolutionaries, and the Russian people more generally, at a time when the American authorities, as well as the public, was rather anxious about foreign and domestic radicalism. The article identifies suffering Russian women at the center of narratives that intended to create sympathy for the Russian Revolution. Particularly vulnerable female bodies were used as veneers to draw the American audience and the world into supporting the revolution. The article approaches the topic of vulnerability through the work of literary scholar Thomas Laqueur, and specifically his analyses of suffering as a literary trope, to explore the narratives' particular structures and the kinds of Russian vulnerabilities that the writers presented. It analyzes the affective attachments to the bodies at the center of these narratives, and the subsequent imaginaries they inspire, thereby crucially influencing American cultural and political imaginaries as such through the application of Laqueur's ideas. Additionally, the analysis will focus on the question why suffragists and feminists were so particularly invested in the creation and dissemination of these humanitarian narratives, suggesting that the support of Russian revolutionary women was as much in solidarity with the Russians as it was a means to further their own causes and ideas, including women's emancipation.

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Suffragists and Russian Suffering

Vulnerability in Early Progressive US Movements

Katharina Wiedlack

This article is part of a larger project about the significance of Russia and Russian entities for US identity formations and the negotiation of values during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I contend that the corporeal vulnerability of female (and queer) Russian martyrs, in need of American "support," if not even outright "saving," and who appear so prominently in current homophile and feminist North American discourses, has historical roots. Furthermore, I claim that American progressive thinking emerged within a discursive field structured through narratives of Russian backwardness and female suffering and hopes for Bolshevik communism to be a liberating force for women worldwide. Looking at pro-Russian revolutionary texts produced between roughly 1880 and 1917, I identify vulnerable female bodies that served as pretenses for drawing the world into supporting the revolution.

Building on prior literature that investigates the exceptionally widespread support for a foreign revolutionary struggle at a time when the American authorities as well as the general public were rather anxious about foreign and domestic radicalism, I argue that American social progressives, including suffragists and early feminists,[1] developed and distributed narratives about suffering Russian women not only to create sympathy for the Russian Revolution but also to further their own causes and ideas, including women's emancipation. Moreover, through their lobbying efforts, women found or claimed substantial agency.

I approach the topic of vulnerability through the work of literary scholar Thomas Laqueur and, specifically, his analyses of suffering as a literary trope. Adopting Laqueur's approach, I analyze how the humanitarian narratives successfully created public and individual affects toward Russian people. I am particularly interested in the affective attachments to the bodies at the center of these narratives and

the subsequent imaginaries they inspired, thereby crucially influencing American cultural and political imaginaries. Furthermore, I am interested in the question as to why suffragists or early feminists were so particularly invested in the creation and dissemination of these humanitarian narratives. Connecting Laqueur's approach on suffering to feminist and queer works on vulnerability, I conceptualize vulnerability as both a relational element, in terms of Judith Butler's thinking,[2] and as something that gives rise to social and cultural separation, in the sense put forth by Martha Fineman.[3] Following Deborah Gould's work on affects and emotions, I explore how affective intensities toward vulnerable Russian bodies serve as a tool to historically demarcate "political imaginaries and their conditions of possibility."[4] Taking a cue from Heather Love's seminal book *Feeling Backward* (2007),[5] I further investigate the relevance of affective aspects of US–Russia imaginaries for the concepts of futurity and progress.

Scholarship on American solidarity with the Russian revolutionaries at the turn of the century, and especially its iteration in the Free Russia Movement, is divided along two contrasting views. One view, which is most strongly supported by David S. Foglesong's analysis of the Free Russia Movement in his monograph *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire"* (2007), is that the American supporters were driven by a "Messianic outlook" or "American Messianic approach" to liberate Russia and recreate it in their own image, American twentieth-century capitalism, which was put forth in their discourses as an ideal place and model for the world.[6] Following this school of thought, American progressives would have interpreted Russian revolutionaries exclusively as being suffering victims, without agency, who needed saving by already enlightened Americans.

In his influential book *Modernization from the Other Shore* (2004), historian David Engerman interprets American support of the Russian Revolution and subsequent modernization under Bolshevik rule along similar lines. Although he does not fully support the idea that American witnesses to the Russian Revolution presented Russian people as helpless victims, he, like Foglesong, asserts that American intellectuals were convinced that their own "industrial, urban, cosmopolitan, rational, and democratic" society had already represented the peak of human achievements, "endors[ing] radical forms of social change everywhere except in the United States." Moreover, he claims that these American supporters of Russia accepted coldheartedly the great human sacrifice involved in the project of Bolshevik industrial modernization, convinced of its "accompanying dialectic of suffering, through which present hardship would give birth to future prosperity."[7]

Many feminist American and Russian studies historians, including Julia Mickenberg, Choi Chatterjee, Beth Holmgren, and Chelsea Gibson, who have equally analyzed

American views on Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, challenge this view.[8] Looking beyond the accounts of officials such as diplomats and other (male) experts, and taking into account the perspective of humanitarians and social reformers, feminists, and abolitionists, these feminist scholars argue that the Americans, acting on behalf of the Russian revolutionaries, were indeed interested in political change that reached beyond the Russian territories. In other words, they believed at least partly in the Russian revolutionary ideas, and saw their cause as connected to their own struggle. The reason why Engerman and Foglesong missed these influential socio-political discourses is, arguably, because their research was exclusively concerned with the predominantly male domains of diplomacy and institutional academic knowledge production. Feminist activism and its mediation through journalistic and other writing, as well as charitable activities, were surely equally pivotal in forming public opinion, however.

I follow this feminist line of thought and focus on the connection between Russian revolutionary activities and American feminists. I will show that the humanitarian narratives around vulnerable female Russian revolutionaries presented both a messianic outlook and an Americanized version of the female revolutionary. Further, I argue that, in many cases, the desire to reform or even revolutionize US society drove support for the Russian revolutionaries because women saw themselves as fighting for the same cause: women's liberation and equity. In this way, American women partly projected their own ideas onto Russian radicals or interpreted their politics and actions through their context-specific lenses, regardless of and, in some cases, in contradiction to Russian women's stance on feminist politics.

Tragic Russia

> The Russian people suffer under the Czar. And this is why we regard it not only as our right, but our duty to struggle with all our might and by every means against the despotism which is the supreme cause of our country's woes. And I appeal to you, in the name of humanity, in the name of the honor of men and of women, to do your utmost to help us to rid ourselves of this … barbarous and stupid power called Czarism …
>
> "A Russian Woman's Experience," *The Woman's Journal* XXXVI, No. 4 (January 28, 1905), 14.

American cultural discourses of the late nineteenth century presented Russia as a dark place, full of tragedies produced by an unjust, backward, authoritarian regime. Popular theater and film productions, as well as historical writing and suffrage and

women's rights journals and magazines such as the *Woman's Journal* quoted above, popularized the idea of a dark Russia and offered eyewitness testimony as proof to the tragedy of Russian suffering.[9] Progressive discourses placed suffering Russian revolutionary women, or "martyr-heroines" as historian Barbara Alpern Engel calls them,[10] at the center of their humanitarian narratives, partly as a spectacle, but partly also to delineate humanitarian and feminist ideas around their vulnerable bodies.

In his seminal essay "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative" (1989), Thomas Laqueur interrogates the question of "how details about the suffering bodies of others engender compassion and how that compassion comes to be understood as a moral imperative to undertake ameliorative action." He argues that, already during the eighteenth century, detailed narratives of ordinary individuals' suffering, pain, and death became popularized in a fashion that suggested a causal link between the deeds of the readers and the suffering of the subjects of the narrative. He identifies these descriptions as a new "aesthetic enterprise" and form, "the humanitarian narrative," which relies on "detail as the sign of truth." They create a "reality effect" and hence are a crucial part of "the literary technique through which the experiences of others are represented as real in the humanitarian narrative." Equally important is the way in which the humanitarian narrative presents an individual body, not only as the site of vulnerability, pain, and suffering "but also as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help and as the object of the . . . discourse through which the causal links between an evil, a victim, and a benefactor are forged." Importantly, the humanitarian narrative reveals to the world "the lineaments of causality and of human agency": humanitarian actions being the humanitarian narrative's "moral imperative."[11] Although Laqueur focuses on medical rather than journalistic and fictional writing, I argue that features of his humanitarian narrative are equally present in the social and political writings on Russian revolutionary women by progressives, and especially feminist authors, between c. 1880 and 1920. I build my argument partly on Chelsea Gibson's exhaustive work on the role of the Russian "revolutionary martyr-heroine" for the emergence of the American Free Russia Movement.[12]

Gibson elaborates on Barbara Engel's analysis of the martyr-heroine as a central aspect of the Russian revolutionary movement. Engel identifies the self-fashioned, internalized, and highly gendered myth around the martyr-heroine as being crucial for eliciting public sympathy and support for the violent revolutionary movement. Presenting the women revolutionaries as unconditionally devoted, vulnerable, self-sacrificing, and almost holy figures, this myth greatly influenced generations of Russian revolutionary women and men, independent of their various political affilia-

tions. While Engel's work focuses exclusively on the Russian context, Gibson demonstrates that the mythology of the Russian martyr-heroine was, from the time of its emergence, translated into the American context, where, "inflected by American expectations and framed for an American audience,"[13] it not only crucially influenced American views on Russian revolutionary actions and their protagonists but also ignited pro-revolutionary activities in the USA. While Gibson is primarily interested in how the US's focus on the suffering and self-sacrifice of female revolutionaries legitimatized or even glorified terrorist violence in support of the Russian Revolution, I am interested in the incorporation of this "suffering Russian martyr-heroine" into humanitarian narratives that helped American women create affective humanitarian structures, thus allowing them to become active socio-political agents in a public and transnational arena, or, in other words, full citizens of the United States. I argue that through their focus on Russian vulnerable bodies and their (often) deadly acts of resistance against injustice, American women found agency within the political realm. Although this is not the main concern of my article, I suggest that this position of the female (or femininized) vulnerable Russian martyr, as a subject of American empathy and as instigator of humanitarian action, is still prevalent in humanitarian narratives in American public culture, for example, as embodied by the Pussy Riot activists,[14] as well as amongst young, vulnerable, and feminized homosexual men.[15]

There's a Light in Dark Russia; Or, The Emergence of the Heroic Female Martyr

The mythology around the noble Russian underground revolutionaries emerged on the international terrain with the work of the anarchist revolutionary Sergei Kravchinskii, known as Stepniak,[16] and his highly popular portrayal of famous Russian revolutionaries, titled *Underground Russia*,[17] which was published in English in 1882. Stepniak visited the US in 1890 to lobby for the revolutionary cause and co-founded the American branch of the Society of Friends for Russian Freedom (SFRF). Suffragists and women's rights advocates became part of the early phase of the SFRF, among them the inaugural members Julia Ward Howe and Alice Stone Blackwell and the later member, Elizabeth Buffum Chace.[18]

During the late 1880s and 1890s, stories about Russian women revolutionaries and their violent acts were quite frequent in the American mainstream press and popular culture. Following Stepniak's cue, these narratives represented Russian revolutionary women as heroic figures of the highest moral caliber, making them appear as "educated and western-style liberals fighting for a constitutional, democratic government,"[19] rather than as socialist radicals, thereby interpreting their deeds not as terrorist acts but as acts of self-defense. Progressive women, in particular, amplified

the idea that the female Russian radicals were "respectable, sympathetic, and westernized," sacrificing themselves to "rid the world of a tyrant," as an author of *The New York Times* expressed it in 1878.[20] The label and philosophical movement associated with these female Russian revolutionaries, "nihilists" and "nihilism," in difference to later labels such as "communists," "socialists," or "anarchists," seemed less threatening and helped create a sympathetic image of Russian revolutionary women within broader US discourses. And feminists participated in this rhetorical deradicalization, even though radicals such as Emma Goldman played an active part in their pro-revolutionary coalition. The Russian Empire feared and accordingly dehumanized these women terrorists, while the Russian intelligentsia celebrated them for their terrorist acts.

One of the radical Russian women whom Stepniak made popular in the US was Sophia Perovskaya, a revolutionary from St. Petersburg. Perovskaya participated in the assassination of Alexander II of Russia, which, after several failed attempts, finally succeeded on March 1, 1881. Perovskaya was hanged for it six weeks later. Her story was arguably intriguing for many, including social reformers and suffragists, because she did not try to escape her arrest by fleeing St. Petersburg. When captured, she asked to be treated like her male comrades and not to be given any lenience for being a woman. Perovskaya was the first women ever to be executed for a political crime, which many international observers viewed as a crime against the natural order of things.[21] Her appearance, her demeanor (her resistance), and her gender (perceived as additional vulnerability) inspired sympathy among the observers of the trial, and her execution created a furor far beyond the Russian boarders. Stepniak emphasized Perovskaya's beauty and youthfulness and connected it closely to her revolutionary abilities. He thereby cemented what Gibson calls the "important facet of the martyr-heroine trope: the more beautiful the woman, the more righteous her cause."[22] Importantly, Perovskaya's womanhood and the seemingly connected vulnerability were emphasized as the source of her commitment to the revolutionary cause in Stepniak's writing. Moreover, according to Stepniak, Perovskaya was only one of many fully dedicated women who did not fear hardship, loss, or even death.

Another example of Stepniak's strong influence on the American humanitarian narrative of Russian vulnerability and suffering was his portrayal of the revolutionary Olga Liubatovich in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1883. Stepniak detailed Liubatovich's escape from exile and her participation in the revolutionary underground in quite dramatic terms, emphasizing her girlish character and her love for one of her comrades, whom she married and with whom she had a child. When her husband was arrested, Liubatovich had to decide between her child or the fight for the revolution: "On the one side was maternal feeling; on the other her ideal, her convictions, her

devotion to the cause which [her husband] steadfastly served. She did not hesitate for a moment." She ended up leaving her child behind; the child soon died, and, after failing to free her husband, Liubatovich herself was arrested. Ending Liubatovich's story, Stepniak emphasized that "hundreds and hundreds" of Russian women shared her fate.[23] Through his detailed stories of individual Russian women heroines and their simultaneous embedding into the narrative of Russian female vulnerability and suffering as a nationwide phenomenon, Stepniak laid out the template for many humanitarian narratives to come.

What arguably drew suffragists and feminists to the Russian revolutionary cause was the high percentage of female revolutionaries among the different groups and movements. Women made up between twenty and fifty percent of the various radical groups/circles, student protests, labor collectives, etc.[24] More often, these women were even more radical and devoted to the cause than their male counterparts, since they could not reconcile the socially expected roles with their revolutionary aspirations and were thus forced to break with their former lives and families. These Russian women, like many other women around the world, were invested in finding ways to advance the role of women within society, demanding women's rights and equality with men.[25] In essence, Russian women's low literacy rate, their subordinate place in society, and the fact that they were neither allowed to hold their own passports nor get a job without a male relative's permission were increasingly understood and presented as signs of the entire country's backwardness—a backwardness created by the czarist regime, which held civil society back, preventing modernization and inhibiting progress. The entire country was increasingly represented by the figure of the struggling Russian woman.[26]

Russian revolutionaries and their US supporters imported the narrative of Russian female martyrdom into US discourses, using significations projected onto white and middle-class women, including "purity, innocence, and maternal nurturing."[27] Seen against this foil of Victorian ideas of white middle-class womanhood, Russian women's revolutionary actions, including acts of violence, were understood as "a product of [female] natural instincts, not a political agenda."[28] In fact, the narrative of the martyr-heroine equally built upon the image of the barbaric and despotic Russian Empire, as "only true despotism could compel women's 'tender natures' to assassination or regicide."[29]

In successfully promoting the myth of the Russian martyr-heroine, Russian revolutionaries also implemented what Susan Morrissey has termed a "moral economy of terrorism,"[30] a logic that justified political violence by emphasizing the victims' guilt and the assassin's morality. Although violent political action was generally at odds with the American ideal of a respectable woman, the demonization of the czarist

regime as violator of vulnerable women, and the whole of Russia's integrity and life, allowed the media of the time to present the female terrorists not as transgressive but instead as performing their "'natural' duties as wives and mothers."[31]

George Kennan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the Establishment of the Humanitarian Narrative

Along with Stepniak and other Russian Nihilists who addressed the American public through liberal publications such as *The North American Review*,[32] George Kennan (1845–1924), the American liberal and Russia expert, played a significant role in changing public opinion in the revolutionaries' favor. Previously a defender of the czarist regime, Kennan spent much of 1885 and 1886 touring Siberian hard labor camps, penal labor colonies, and distant exile colonies, as correspondent for *Century Magazine*.[33] The experience of meeting many well-educated, Western-oriented political exiles who suffered under an inhumane penal system amid poor living conditions at their various locations transformed Kennan entirely. He became a dedicated lobbyist for the revolutionary cause, offering American readers humanitarian narratives in the form of intimate stories of individual revolutionaries.[34] Kennan's emphatic language encouraged his American readers to imagine themselves in the position of vulnerable Russian exiles, freezing to death in the harsh, remote Siberian landscape "because they dared ask for the liberties enshrined in the US Constitution."[35]

Kennan is one of the American liberals that Engerman identified as representing Russian revolutionary activity as a political struggle against an intolerable government, to further progressive liberal aims and to reach the American status quo. While Kennan, like Stepniak, idealized beautiful, noble-yet-vulnerable Russian women as victims of czarist oppression, he did not emphasize their agency and resistance. Rather than representing revolutionary women in action, he showed them as political prisoners in their isolated exile in Siberia. Accordingly, rather than heroism and bravery, his narratives presented the tragic conditions of everyday hardship and the struggle to simply survive. In his writing, the region of Siberia became a metaphor for the Russian regime's brutality and disregard of human life, an unlivable place that could only mean death to vulnerable women. Kennan toured the US in the late 1880s and early 1890s, giving lectures about what he had witnessed in Siberia. To illustrate the effect of czarist brutality on the beautiful young women, and to heighten reactions to his narratives, Kennan used poignant photographs. He showed pictures of women before their imprisonment and displacement and contrasted these with images from the time of their Siberian exile, showing "worn, broken, almost invalid wom[e]n." To inspire further emotional reactions from his audience, he asked them to look for the "trace of the beautiful young girl who was sent to Siberia," only to shock

them even more with the information that the young girl had died while he was in Moscow with her.[36] This "story was typical; [o]ut of six women that appeared in his lecture, five died—two by insanity, two by disease, and one by suicide."[37]

Kennan often presented cases of "cultivated and attractive" young women and mothers who went "violently insane," due to the brutality of the czarist regime.[38] He detailed the inhospitable and cruel conditions in the Kara Gold Mines, located in Eastern Siberia and other places, where women served their sentences of hard labor. He described in detail how the great potential of individual noble women, who could have otherwise contributed to the progress of Russian society, was wasted in prison. He also described the mental toll from which their psyches had suffered, as a result of the inhumane conditions of Transbaikal and the brutality of the treatment in the hard labor camp. Moreover, he emphasized that the women were often young mothers, violently separated from their small children. In one case, he "even read a letter supposedly written by [a] little girl to her mother" and told the audience that, due to the pain of separation, the woman had gone insane and died.[39] Kennan presented the young women at the Kara mines as innocent victims of a ruthless Russian regime. While he mourned their deaths, he equally "portrayed them as a source of hope for Americans who longed to see Russia liberalized . . ., and he concluded that it was 'impossible to despair of the future of a country that contains such women.'"[40]

The humanitarian narratives that Stepniak, Kennan, and others offered to the American audience portrayed vulnerable women as victims of arbitrary cruelty by a regime that did not care for human beings. Indeed, these women were used as antidotes to the czarist regime's barbarity. They were represented as driven by their natural maternal instinct to care for all who suffered—not only for their immediate family but for the entire country. Not everyone in the US fully subscribed to this essentialist narrative, which was built on problematic binary gender stereotypes. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the women's rights activist, for example, was drawn to the emancipatory political aspects of the participation and leadership of Russian women in revolutionary movements.[41] Interested in nihilism, communism, and socialism, Stanton traveled to Europe in the 1880s, where she met Stepniak and other Russian revolutionaries. Piotr Kroptokin, in particular, left a lasting impression on Stanton. In her memoirs, she wrote that "Krapotkine told us of his sad prison experiences, both in France and Russia. He said the series of articles by George Kennan in the *Century* were not too highly colored, that the sufferings of men and women in Siberia and the Russian prisons could not be overdrawn."[42] Back in the US, Stanton emphasized in her writing and speeches the suffering and hardship as well as the bravery of Russian women. In her 1888 address to the International Council of Women in Washington, DC, Stanton praised the "noble Russian women who have so courageously identified themselves in the struggle for freedom, and expiated their love of liberty on the scaffold, [the]

dungeons of St. Petersburg and the mines of Siberia. [These women] prove triumphantly that woman knows how to die for a principle."[43] At the same meeting, Stanton read a letter that Kropotkin had written to the women, lobbying among the elite in the audience for support and solidarity with their poor sisters, suggesting they should take a lesson from Persovskaya's self-sacrifice and dedication.[44]

While the Russian radicals' terrorist acts might have been intriguing signs of agency, I suggest that female women's rights advocates, such as Stanton, were especially drawn to Perovskaya and other female Russian martyrs because of the strong agency they demonstrated in the face of death. They did not simply accept their vulnerability and powerlessness but embraced them as the strongest form of resistance possible in their situation, forcing the Russian regime to show its most violent side. Although the intensity of the diverse lobbying efforts, including the efforts of the American Free Russia Movement, decreased significantly after its initial phase, and although the influence of the American humanitarian narrative about female suffering in Russia was not yet reflected on the terrain of official diplomatic relations, these efforts profoundly changed the prevailing American view of Russian revolutionaries: from terrorists to civic actors in the cause for freedom and western progress.[45]

During the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, more and more humanitarian narratives that focused on the hardship of heroic and brave, vulnerable Russian women started appearing in popular culture, especially in romance fiction.[46] The American poet Joaquin Miller, for example, dedicated the poem "To The Czar" (1897) to the "maiden, gentle born" Perovskaya, who could not coup with the "the foulest wrong the good God knows" and who therefore had to act by helping assassinate Alexander II, for which she was punished by hanging: "And did a woman do this deed? / Then build her scaffold high / That all may on her forehead read / Her martyr's right to die!"[47] Many of these narratives positioned a white woman as Russia's future against a racialized, dark, and backward Russia.

Catherine Breshkovsky, Alice Stone Blackwell, and the Tales of Russian Suffering

One of the key figures and female martyrs featured in the narratives about Russian female suffering was Ekaterina Konstantinovna Breshko-Breshkovskaia, known in the USA as Catherine Breshkovsky.[48] Breshkovsky was portrayed in the American press as the embodiment of Russian female vulnerability and suffering endlessly defied. She herself contributed to the proliferation of narratives of white heroic female suffering, set against a Russian Orientalized barbarism. Breshkovsky was already an elderly woman when Kennan met her in her exile on his tour through Sibe-

ria in the 1880s.[49] He saw in her a hint of a brighter future behind all the Russian darkness.[50] Breshkovsky was in her sixties by the time she went to the US in 1904 to lobby for the revolutionary cause.

Once in the US, Breshkovsky became a staple feature in *The Woman's Journal*, the nation's largest suffrage newspaper.[51] In his article in the newspaper, Kellogg Durland from the University Settlement in New York City famously presented Breshkovsky as a "heroic Russian woman" of "noble spirit," who had suffered twenty-two years in prison and Siberian exile before she came to the US. "This woman of destiny," according to Durland, aimed at nothing less than the "soul-emancipation of the vast peasantry" for whom she was a "Joan of Arc who might lead armies to victory … Schooled to face death any day, she worked as though eternity reached before her. [T]o look upon the face of this silver-haired apostle is like receiving a benediction."[52] The article was accompanied by a portrait of Breshkovsky, dressed in simple clothes, with white hair cropped at the ears. In a comment on Durland's article, Alice Stone Blackwell, *The Woman's Journal* co-editor and Free Russia advocate, emphasized that Breshkovsky was a "living refutation of the argument that woman cannot be induced to take an interest in politics," showing the true "possibilities of feminine human nature."[53]

In 1904, Breshkovsky was already a revolutionary icon in Russia; but in the US hardly anyone knew her, with the exception of radical activists, feminists, and anarchists.[54] Once in the US, she managed almost immediately to gain the trust and support of highly influential women, among them the women's rights advocates and pioneers of the US settlement house movement, Lillian Wald, Jane Addams, and labor organizer Helena Dudley.[55] Through the involvement and support of progressive US women, the narrative of the Russian female martyr was also marked as politically significant. And while most scholars emphasize that American allies ignored the violent aspects of the actions of Russian female revolutionaries, Chelsea Gibson and Julia L. Mickenberg argue that the use of violence by female revolutionaries was part of their appeal.[56]

Unsurprisingly, then, other famous supporters were the feminist anarchist Emma Goldman and, perhaps most importantly, Alice Stone Blackwell. Blackwell was a passionate suffragist, women's rights activist, and labor reformer, daughter of suffragist Lucy Stone and Henry Brown Blackwell, co-director of the National Woman Suffrage Association, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and co-editor of *The Woman's Journal*.[57] Together with Kennan, Blackwell revived the American Society of Friends of Russian Freedom in the years leading up to 1904 and Breshkovsky's arrival to the US.[58] Blackwell, who had already been a member of the first iteration of the American Society of Friends of Russian Freedom in the early 1890s, transformed the Society into "a small news bureau," employing the strategies used to disseminate news about women's suffrage.[59] With the assistance of Kennan, she sent reporters

out to newspapers and magazines all over the country, having the news translated from Russian to English.[60]

Blackwell, Addams, Wald and Dudley, and other progressives were drawn to Breshkovsky and the Free Russia Movement because they were interested in expanding their own agency beyond the national level.[61] The image of Breshkovsky as a modest, yet dedicated, grandmother allowed the settlement and women's rights advocates to reach beyond their circles, in their attempt to lobby for support of the Russian cause. Mainstream media such as the *New York Times* willingly printed favorable portraits of "a little white-haired and mild-eyed woman, the prevailing Slav type, but with intelligent and pleasantly smiling features."[62] The focus on Breshkovsky's body and age allowed reporters to represent her as a non-threatening and very likeable gentle person, which made her persecution and treatment by the czarist regime seem completely exaggerated and outrageous and, in turn, her revolutionary efforts the more heroic. *The New York Times*, for example, emphasized that "this little woman, who is now far advanced into the fifties, has been working and suffering and working again more than thirty-five years for the cause of Russian freedom."[63] *The Sun* equally emphasized her features to create empathy among the readers, saying that "her face is delicate and intellectual . . . Her grizzled hair contrasts strikingly with an almost youthful complexion and alert eyes,"[64] and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* saw her eyes "flashing with the spirit of freedom,"[65] despite all the pain and suffering she had endured. All these articles also commented on her dress, describing it as a simple "multitude of garments,"[66] or "shawl[s]" from under which Breshkovsky looked out,[67] endowing this woman, who was the daughter of a nobleman and who had entirely given up her comfortable existence, with the look of a peasant women.

One widely distributed portrayal of Breshkovsky was that of Ernest Poole. First published in January 1905 in the progressive magazine *The Outlook* (which sold around 100,000 copies per week[68]), it was later published as a stand-alone publication and sold at Breshkovsky's speaking events.[69] In the opening lines of his depiction, Poole describes Breshkovsky's features in detail, emphasizing how the cruelty of the Russian regime had altered her body:

> Her hair, once cut in prison, has grown again. A great wavy mass of gray frames a face broad, heavy, deep-lined with suffering. Her eyes, deep under high-arched brows, now flash the fires of her dream, now beam forth the warm affections of one whom hundreds call endearingly "Babushka"—little grandmother. Her voice, . . . ran swiftly over her own sufferings, but rose passionately describing her country's degradation. Daughter of a nobleman . . .; then revolutionist, hard labor convict and exile for 23 years in Siberia; and now a heroic old woman of 61, she has plunged again into the dangerous struggle for freedom. The Russian Revolutionary Movement is embodied in this one heroic figure.[70]

Typical for the humanitarian narrative, her body serves not only as the sight of the regime's cruel acts but also as a source of revolutionary agency.

Blackwell, Kennan, and her many other American supporters arranged several opportunities for Breshkovsky to speak to American audiences in settlement houses, at socialist meeting halls, at women's colleges, and in suffragist clubs, in order to collect donations.[71] Blackwell organized and published translations of her speeches.[72] To reach a broad audience and to increase the willingness to donate, especially from the more affluent classes, Breshkovsky's American advisers, such as Paul Kellogg of the New York settlement project Greenwich House and editor of *Charities*, suggested that Breshkovsky emphasize the economic and social hardships of the Russian people, as well as the lack of education.[73]

Obviously supporting a strategy that wished to show Breshkovsky as just one of the millions suffering from czarist despotism, *The Woman's Journal* printed excerpts of her speeches and passages from interviews where she emphasized the plight of young women and children: "My fellow-prisoners were mostly young women of the nobility, excellent and charming persons, but delicately bred, and not physically able to bear such hardships. They sickened one by one. Their bodies became blue with scurvy. Those of us who kept well had to spend all our time going from bed to bed nursing the sick . . ., but my companions died one after another, till half of them were gone."[74]

Moreover, Breshkovsky presented revolutionary activities as "philanthropic" acts in magazines such as *The American*,[75] in order to appeal to affluent American men and women interested in charity. In emphasizing the role of women in revolutionary activism, and in focusing especially on those aspects of revolutionary action that resembled charitable causes within the US that were predominantly domains of female philanthropy—efforts to feed the hungry or house the homeless, for example—she became a popular role model for women in progressive circles.

In January 1905, soldiers of the Imperial Guard opened fire on a mass of unarmed demonstrators in St. Petersburg. Led by the peasant priest Father Georgy Gapon, the people had come to the Winter Palace to demonstrate for better working conditions. The world was outraged by the cruelty of this act, and, thereafter, Breshkovsky found a new and broader audience. In an essay in *Outlook* in February 1905, she revered Father Gapon as an example of what happened to those brave people who dared to care about the suffering of their fellow people and who tried to fight for betterment of their conditions.[76] She described the suffering of the Russian peasants as unimaginable to foreigners and emphasized that there were many Father Gapons in Russia, who needed their support.

White Women's Bodies, Rape, and the Creation of the "Dark Cossack Soldier"

The Russo-Japanese War and the first Russian Revolution in 1905 further enhanced public sympathy for Russian revolutionaries such as Breshkovsky; but when the failure of the first revolution became apparent, many American analysts, and a large part of the public, returned to believing that the Russian peasants were not ready to fight for freedom.[77] Thus, Free Russia activists increased their efforts to present to the American public the suffering of the Russian people—"oppressed, down-trodden, famine-stricken, and wretched"[78]—and introduce female revolutionary figures in whom they could believe. Especially in the years after the first, failed revolution, many articles focused on the physical violation of Russians, for example, brutalization by soldiers, prison guards, and police. In these texts, vulnerable female bodies reflected not only the selfish and cruel acts by which the czarist government subjugated the Russian people but also the hope for the survival and final victory of humanity in "darkest Russia."

One of the individual heroic women that captured the attention of sympathetic Americans was twenty-one-year-old Maria Spiridonova, who assassinated the security official G. N. Luzhenovskii in 1906, before she was jailed and trialed. While her initial act received little attention in the US, a letter in which she detailed her abuse by police and jail guards—which was printed in the liberal Russian newspaper *Rus*—shocked the American public and convinced many of the cruelty of the czarist regime.[79] In a letter from Tambov jail, Spiridonova describes how officers beat her and burned her naked body with cigarettes, thus implying that they also raped her. American newspapers such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Detroit Free Press* reported on the account, strongly protesting the brutality to which the young woman had been subjected.[80] Additionally, these articles described Luzhenovskii as a monster who "murdered men, assaulted women, [and] crippled children,"[81] calling him a "wholesale murderer and destroyer of women and girls."[82]

Kellogg Durland, who followed Spiridonova's case during his time in Russia in 1906 and 1907, published several texts about her life and her revolutionary act.[83] In 1906, he interviewed Spiridonova in prison. His profile of her in his popular book *The Red Reign*, published in 1908, describes her as a divine figure, a "delicate girl" with "soft, blue eyes," who was brave enough to dare what no one else would. Durland quoted her testimony before the court, where she allegedly said, "You may, now, kill my body, but you cannot destroy my belief that the time of the people's happiness and freedom is surely coming."[84] In his writing, Durland contrasts Spiridonova's dedication and willingness to sacrifice herself in almost religious terms with the ruthlessness of the Russian police men who brutalized her. To elicit strong affects in American audiences,

such as sympathy, pity, and concern for the female revolutionary, outrage about injustice, and antipathy toward the czarist regime, he describes the young woman's violation in what was, for his time, drastic language: "They stripped their prisoner, stark naked, and even at the sight of her bruised and bleeding body did not stop their hellish inquisition of sensuous debauchery and torture. They scarred her quivering flesh with the lighted ends of their cigarettes. They caressed and pounded her by turns."[85]

Significantly, Durland focuses on the woman's body and what men's violence did to her vulnerable flesh. In describing the physical assault of the young woman, he recreates the reality and manipulates his readers into affective reactions. In doing so, Durland builds on earlier accounts that had also illustrated the cruel barbarism of the czarist regime, by exhibiting the effects it had on individual female bodies. Leroy Scott pointed out that Spiridonova's "body was the body of Russia; just so was Russia daily treated,"[86] and in a poem published in her magazine *The Woman Rebel*, Margaret Sanger expresses the view that the Russian officers violated Spiridonova "with the whole iniquity / that hath been done to Russia by her Czar."[87] Breshkovsky also recounted horrible scenes of the mass rapes of female prisoners on her trip to her Siberian exile, to exemplify the cruelty of the czarist regime,[88] and Kennan reported in 1891 that, due to the "fear of insult or outrage" (a code for assault or rape), women prisoners were forced to live with male exiles in Siberia.[89]

Durland, Scott, and others continued their description of female suffering in their articles for the *Woman's Home Companion* and *The Outlook* until the Russian Revolution.[90] While their accounts sensationally focused on rape and other forms of violation of the female body and mind, they also addressed female agency. Although they highlighted women's political agency, they framed it in depoliticized terms, suggesting that women's maternal instincts and their strong empathy for the victims of czarist cruelties had "impelled so many gentle-souled women to" revolutionary action.[91] Following this gendered logic, Scott describes, for example, one female revolutionary as a "delicate girl," "with her gentle, quiet smile," who told him that "when one's people is suffering such agony, one has no right to think of self." Although his account comes across as deeply condescending, it can be assumed that his conclusion was what drew feminists to supporting the Russian cause: "This girl represents the voices of thousands of Russian women. When, in the happier future, the history of the Russian Revolution is written, one feature of the great struggle which will distinguish it from other movements of its kind will be the part played by women."[92]

Like Scott, Durland, and Kennan, settlement house activists who supported women's suffrage, such as Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and, of course, Blackwell, contributed to the popularity of the humanitarian narrative that portrayed Russian women

as both the victims of czarism and the future of Russia.[93] When Breshkovsky was arrested and again sent into exile in Siberia between 1907 and 1910, the Free Russia advocates increased the dissemination of narratives of Russian females suffering even further. Again, the Free Russia movement narrated Breshkovsky's story as one of hardship and suffering to create sympathetic interest in the Russian revolutionary movement. Goldman, Wald, Blackwell, and other supporters managed to correspond with Breshkovsky frequently, publishing excerpts and quotes of her letters in the *Woman's Journal* and other American magazines.[94] Most of these letters are also reprinted in Blackwell's detailed portrait of Breshkovsky, *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution*, which was published in 1917.[95]

Blackwell's depiction of Breshkovsky quotes Kennan's and others' accounts, which describe her as a self-sacrificing grandmother. Their eyewitness accounts are supplemented through direct quotes of Breshkovsky's public speeches, utterances during discussions and other conversations, as well as through the aforementioned letters to Blackwell and other supporters during her second exile. Breshkovsky not only became a celebrity in the eyes of the US, but the already planted idea of an unjust, despotic, backward czarist regime that needed to be removed also manifested itself as mainstream opinion.[96] Theresa Serber Malkiel, a socialist suffragist of Russian origin, celebrated Breshkovsky as an international role model[97]; the socialist feminist and editor of *The Progressive Woman*, Josephine Conger-Kaneko, dedicated several articles to the "aged woman, white-haired, bent, soul-tortured in her efforts to enlighten an enslaved people"[98]; and feminist anarchist Goldman celebrated Breshkovsky in her journal *Mother Earth* as a saint-like woman, "undaunted by cruelty, persecution, and privation."[99] Elsa Barker, a popular poet, wrote the poem "Breshkovskaya" (1910), which depicted her as a female version of Jesus Christ: "Take in your hand once more the pilgrim's staff— / Your delicate hand misshapen from the nights / In Kara's mines; bind on your unbent back / That long has borne the burdens of the race, / The exile's bundle, and upon your feet / Strap the worn sandals of a tireless faith."[100] Interestingly enough, the poem, like many of the articles on Breshkovsky, focuses on her body, thereby not only serving as evidences of suffering and victimization but as embodiments of collective Russian suffering. Many news and magazine articles, such as the feminist magazine *The Progressive Woman*, set the female embodiment of Russian suffering against the specter of czarist inhumanity embodied by a terrifying Cossack prison guard.[101]

While the young, white, female body became a metaphor for Russia suffering under czarism, the Cossack soldiers, often racialized as dark figures who flogged people with whips, increasingly epitomized czarist brutality and the executive body of cruelty. Contributing to the construction of the Cossack soldier as a symbol for czarist

barbarism, the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom declared as one of its primary goals in 1907 to be the end of the "violation of women by the Cossack soldiery."[102]

During the decade leading up to the year 1917, more and more popular culture productions, especially silent films, featured Russian women being victimized by the czarist regime, which was embodied by the exoticized Cossack soldier.[103] *The Cossack Whip*, for example, a film released in 1916 and directed by John H. Collins, stars Viola Dana as a young revolutionary heroine (Illustration 1).[104] In the film, the lead character becomes a revolutionary to avenge her sister's rape and brutal murder—she was flogged to death—by a police prefect. Again, as in the narratives around Spiridonova, and as in many of Breshkovsky's speeches and letters, the young women's violated bodies become the central foci, demonstrating czarist injustice.

The representation of Russian national vulnerability and suffering through the bodies of white females, both young women and gentle old babushkas, in popular culture productions such as *The Cossack Whip* and *The Girl Nihilist* show significant similarities to a variety of other well-known silent films that guard white womanhood.[105] As Gibson argues, "The most obvious parallel is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which portrayed the KKK as saviors, after a young white woman was assaulted by a black man. The Klan flag, for example, contained the color white to represent the purity of white womanhood."[106] Thus, the films build on the well-known racist narratives of an Othered threat against white women, who are idealized as pure and sacred bodies in need of masculine support rather than rational agents, in order to elicit the audience's emotional support and solidarity with the Russians. Unsurprisingly, *The Cossack Whip* and *The Girl Nihilist*, like many of the films about "darkest Russia" under czarist rule, end their stories with the main characters moving to a safe location in the US,[107] while the *dark* Cossacks either die or stay behind. Hence, the depiction of these white female bodies, bearing suffering and hope, and their dark (Cossack) counterparts who perpetuate backward barbarism, signify the visible and seemingly increasing divide between the enlightened West and the barbaric East that Choi Chatterjee identifies in public discourses of the time.[108] Interestingly, this discursive East/West divide concealed the dissent not only within the political Left but within the political sphere of the US in general—at least for a time.

The Russian Revolution and the First Red Scare

When news about the Russian Revolution broke in March 1917, many Americans of different political persuasions became quite excited. Women's active participation in the provisional government, as well as in the fighting action, fascinated many, and this attention was used by suffragists and socialism proponents and opponents to further their own agendas and to push for women's rights in the US. A new and

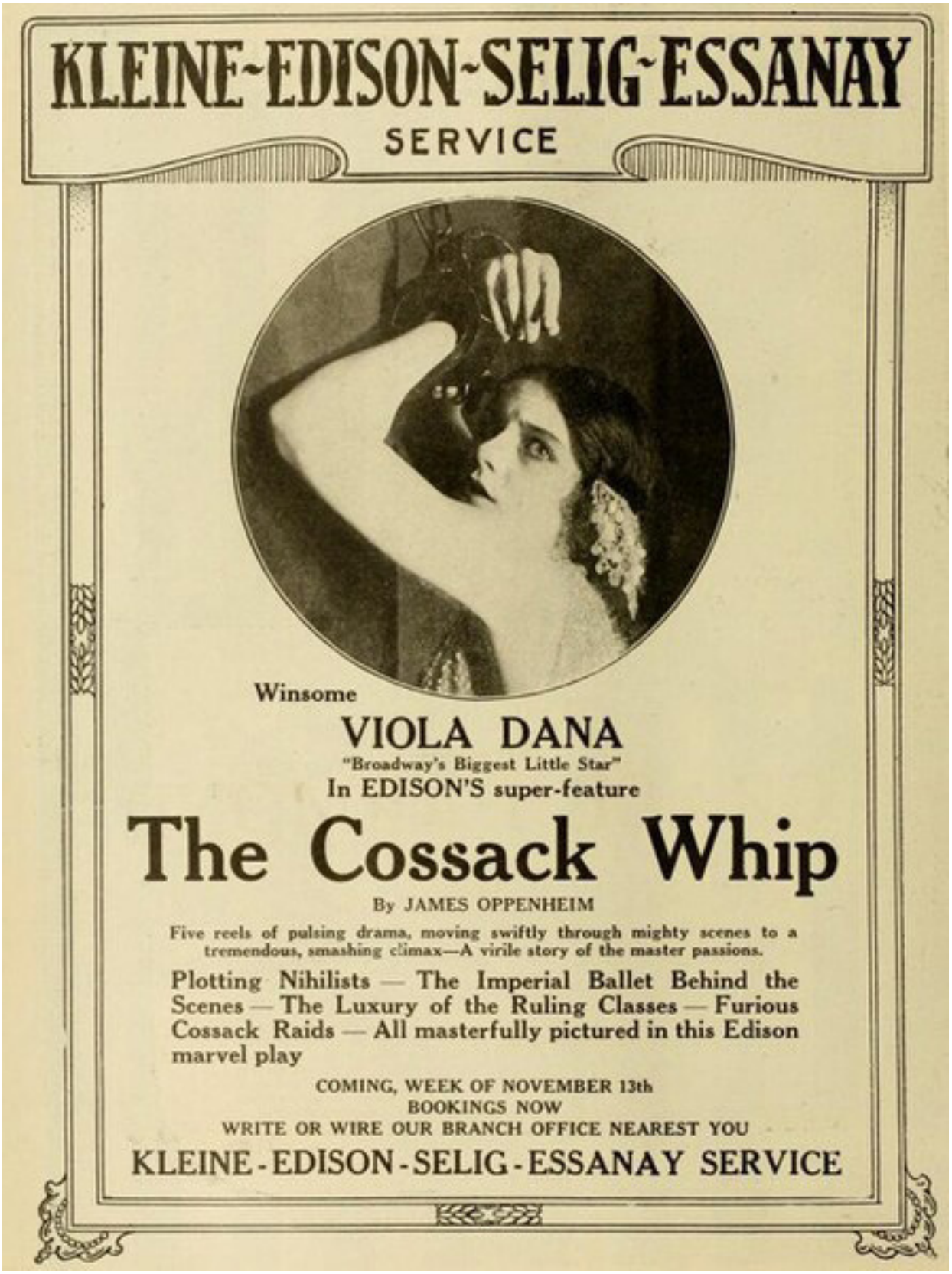

Illustration 1: Poster for the 1916 film *The Cossack Whip*.
From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Cossack_Whip.jpg. This work is in public domain.

younger generation of feminists, including Bessie Beatty, Louise Bryant, Rheta Child Dorr, and Florence MacLeod Harper, became interested in the Russian Revolution, and they focused particularly on women's participation in it, in addition to its effects on the social and cultural lives of Russians.[109] This interest grew even stronger when the Provisional Government established equal suffrage for women in March 1917. American reformers, suffragists, and feminists fighting for full citizenship as well as psychological, sexual, and economic emancipation for women, observed with feverish excitement the events unfolding in Russia, particularly the introduction of new marriage laws, access to divorce, the abolition of the category of illegitimate children, paid maternity leave, access to abortion, and a program of sex education.

While many suffragists viewed developments in Russia as merely a good opportunity to (successfully) pressure the American government into granting women's suffrage, others were convinced that the "darkest Russia" was emerging as a global model for women's equality.[110] For these feminist Leftists, the "events . . . acquired an immediacy almost unimaginable today," strongly affecting the "collective sense of possibility."[111] Mainstream American enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution, however, disappeared when the Bolsheviks took power, and, significantly, when they decided to retreat from the war, rather than joining the Americans and other aligned forces in their fight against the Germans. The broad Free Russia Movement, which had been a coalition between socialists, communists, anarchists, nihilists, suffragists, and other progressives, had already fallen apart over the question as to whether or not the US should join the war, and the Bolshevik revolution divided their ranks even further. Most liberals, like Kennan, were against the Bolsheviks, while progressive realists accepted the Bolsheviks, even if they might have preferred the survival of the interim government under Kerensky. The latter group included people as far apart politically as Addams, Wald, and Blackwell, as well as Goldman. Unfortunately, "these progressive realists between 1917 and 1919 ultimately lost control of the Free Russia narrative in the US that they had helped create.[117] In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, defense of Russian Revolution no longer easily corresponded with American values or political goals."[112] In a climate where the hegemonic discourse supported the government's pro-war agenda, the anti-war feminists with their support of the Russian Revolution were increasingly labeled as subversive, *un-American* or *anti-American*.[113]

Conservatives successfully co-opted the narratives crafted by the Free Russia alliance. They used the narrative of the Siberian exile system, previously used to show the barbaric nature of the czarist regime, changing only the name to "gulag system," in order to call attention to the Bolshevik's atrocities, to prove their alleged inhumanity.[114] Ironically, feminists now found themselves in opposition not only to their former allies but also to their former protégé: Catherine Breshkovsky—one of

the most engaged pro-war, anti-Bolshevik activists.[115] Moreover, the feminists' support or even acceptance of the Bolsheviks as legitimate power was used to discredit them in the US as subversive elements and threats to the public. While there is no evidence or reason to believe that Breshkovsky supported the vilification of feminists as Bolsheviks, her popularity and her story of being ousted from power and sent yet again into exile in Vladivostok were instrumentalized for American anti-Bolshevik and anti-feminist discourses.

Conclusion

The humanitarian narrative of vulnerable Russian women suffering under the barbaric czarist regime significantly shaped American discourses in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. While this kind of narrative was originally introduced by Russian revolutionaries, American progressives, among them many influential feminists, played a crucial role in popularizing it, with the intent of creating positive, affective responses by their audiences.

The humanitarian narrative of American feminists and other progressives portrayed vulnerable Russian women as victims of a barbaric regime—first the czarist, and later, perhaps unintentionally, the Bolshevik regime—and moral vanguards of a bright Russian future. The narrative of beautiful, educated, vulnerable (young) women martyrs, who stood firmly behind their beliefs while being violated by the barbaric Russian regime, builds on Victorian ideas of women's caring and nurturing instincts, amplified with ideas about women's political potential. The gendered representation of women's bodies as being vulnerable emphasizes the cruelties of both regimes, the czarist and Bolshevik one. It imbues the women with moral and progressive significance while simultaneously representing individual women's bodies as embodiments not only of Russia's victimization but also its resilience and potential. This depends on the Orientalizing of the Russian regime as "darkest Russia." Unsurprisingly, Russian women were imagined as being white in such humanitarian narratives, building upon, and projecting onto, the Russian context racist American tropes of black perpetrators threatening innocent white women. While it seems that American suffragists and early feminists were deeply moved and inspired by the Russian women's agency and resistance, their emphasis on Russian women's vulnerability supported discourses that solely focused on women's vulnerability and suffering—discourses that would soon dominate public discussions. Furthermore, such narratives partly reaffirm Victorian white, middle-class gender norms, idealizing caregiving and motherhood. This seems ironic, as the exploitation and publicizing of Russian women's suffering gave American women access to the political sphere.

Through their humanitarian narratives of Russian suffering, these women influ-

enced American views on Russia, creating discourses of emphatic care. And while some of the discourses on Russian women's martyrdom backfired when the US joined the allied forces in WWI, turning against the Bolsheviks, their lobbying for humanitarian relief to Russia after the war was successful. These women's efforts are proof that David Engerman's claim that American intellectuals accepted Russian suffering as necessary collateral in the Bolsheviks' modernization project is, at least partly, wrong. In fact, the focus on Russian suffering, and the strong affective responses to Russian women's vulnerability, allowed American women to develop notions of progressive values in a modern society, which included their own liberation and political activity.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 I differentiate "suffragists" from "early feminists" to indicate that early women's rights advocates, fighting for women's right to vote (suffragists), were not (yet) identified as feminists, nor did they use the term for themselves. Nevertheless, these women can be seen as representing political ideas about women's liberation and equity that were later brought forward under the label "feminism," for example, by the activist Carrie Chapman Catt. See Carrie Chapman Catt, "'Free Love' Charge Held Ridiculous," *New York Times*, February 15, 2014.

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4 Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

5 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

6 David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" since 1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35.

7 David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2, 5.

8 Julia L. Mickenberg, "The New Generation and the New Russia: Modern Childhood as Collective Fantasy," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2010), DOI: 10.1353/aq.0.0118; Julia L. Mickenberg, "Suffragettes and Soviets: American Feminists and the Specter of Revolutionary Russia," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 4 (2014), DOI: 10.1093/jahist/jau004; Julia

L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Choi Chatterjee, "Lady in Red: Russian Revolutionary Languages in the American Imagination, 1917–39," in *The Global Impacts of Russia's Great War and Revolution, Book 2: The Wider Arc of Revolution, Part 1*, ed. Choi Chatterjee, Steven G. Marks, Mary Neuburger, and Steven Sabol (Bloomington: Slavica, 2019); Choi Chatterjee, "Transnational Romance, Terror, and Heroism: Russia in American Popular Fiction, 1860–1917," *Comparative Studies in Society & History* 50, no. 3 (2008), DOI: 10.1017/s0010417508000327; Choi Chatterjee, "'Odds and Ends of the Russian Revolution,' 1917–1920: Gender and American Travel Narratives," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no.4 (2008), 10.1353/jowh.0.0047; Choi Chatterjee and Beth Holmgren, ed., *Americans Experience Russia: Encountering the Enigma, 1917 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Chelsea C. Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines: Women, Violence, and the American Campaign for A Free Russia, 1878–1920," PhD diss. (Binghampton University, State University of New York, 2019).

9 See, for example, Henry Grattan Donnelly's *Darkest Russia: A Grand Romance of The Czarist Realm* (1891) as well as its 1917 film adaptation and the film *The Girl Nihilist* (1908). See Wacław Gąsiorowski, *Tragic Russia* (London: Cassell Limited, 1908).

10 Barbara Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983), 153–55.

11 Thomas W. Laqueur, "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–78.

12 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 79–122.

13 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 12.

14 M. Katharina Wiedlack, "'both married, both moms, both determined to keep getting their message out': The Russian Pussy Riot and US Popular Culture," in *Marlboro Men and California Gurls: Rethinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Astrid M. Fellner, Marta Fernández, and Martina Martausová (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 131.

15 Katharina Wiedlack, "Gays vs. Russia: Media Representations, Vulnerable Bodies and the Construction of a (Post)Modern West," *European Journal of English Studies* 21, no. 3 (2017): 246, DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2017.1369271.

16 Chatterjee, "Transnational Romance," 773; Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 12.

17 Peter Scotto, "The Terrorist as Novelist: Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinsky," in *Just Assassins: The Culture of Terrorism in Russia*, ed. Nina Khrushcheva and Anthony Anemone (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 105.

18 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 73; Alice Stone Blackwell, "The Friends of Russian Freedom," *The Commons* 10, no. 3 (1905).

19 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 12. Most of these women were indeed privileged and educated members of the bourgeoisie, but they were also radicals, willing to exercise violence. Yet, American observers and advocates mitigated their radical ideas and acts of violence, rather than focusing on their gendered vulnerability.

20 "A Russian Chief of Police," *New York Times*, May 11, 1878.

21 Anke Hilbrenner, "The Perovskaia Paradox or the Scandal of Female Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Russia," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 17

(2016): 1–2, 10, DOI: 10.4000/pipss.4169.

22 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 105. This trope still lives on today, for example in the mystification of the Pussy Riot activists Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova in the American press in the years following their arrest in 2012.

23 Sergei Stepniak, "A Female Nihilist," *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1883.

24 Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 129; Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 173; Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 93.

25 Elizabeth A. Wood, "The Woman Question in Russia: Contradictions and Ambivalence," in *A Companion to Russian History*, ed. Abbott Gleason (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009); Stites, *The Woman's Liberation Movement*, 129.

26 An influential fictional narrative that personalizes the plight of Russia through a female character and her struggle for emancipation is Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1861). Interestingly, this book influenced many active feminists in the US, not the least Emma Goldman.

27 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 84.

28 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 85.

29 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 85.

30 Susan K. Morrissey, "The 'Apparel of Innocence': Toward a Moral Economy of Terrorism in Late Imperial Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 84, no. 3 (2012), DOI: 10.1086/666051.

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33 Frederick F. Travis, *George Kennan and the American–Russian Relationship, 1865–1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990).

34 George Kennan, "Prison Life of the Russian Revolutionists. I.," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 35, no. 2 (1887); George Kennan, "A Siberian Tragedy," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 33, no. 1 (1886); George Kennan, "The Life of Administrative Exiles," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 37, no. 3 (1889); George Kennan, "The Convict Mines of Kara," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 38, no. 2 (1889); George Kennan, "State Criminals at the Kara Mines," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 38, no. 4 (1889).

35 George Kennan, "The Last Appeal of the Russian Liberals," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 35, no. 1 (1887): 50.

36 George Kennan, "Russian Political Exiles, Lecture," qtd. in Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 111.

37 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 111.

38 Kennan, "Russian Political Exiles, Lecture," qtd. in Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 112.

39 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 113.

40 Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 114.

41 Lori D. Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

42 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897. The Truly Intriguing and Empowering Life Story of the World Famous American Suffragist, Social Activist and Abolitionist* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin 1898), 411, https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/stanton/years/years.html.

43 National Woman Suffrage Association, *Report of the International Council of Women* (Washington, DC: Rufus H. Darby, 1888), 432.

44 National Woman Suffrage Association, *Report*, 441.

45 Travis, *George Kennan*, 229.

46 Chatterjee, "Transnational Romance," 775.

47 Joaquin Miller, *The Complete Poetical Works of Joaquin Miller* (San Francisco: Whitaker & Ray Co., 1897), 196–97.

48 Alison Rowley, "Russian Revolutionary as American Celebrity: A Case Study of Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mickenberg, *American Girls*, ch. 1; Ben Phillips, "Political Exile and the Image of Siberia in Anglo-Russian Contacts Prior to 1917," PhD diss. (University College London, 2016); Choi Chatterjee, "Imperial Incarcerations: Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, Vinayak Savarkar, and the Original Sins of Modernity," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (2015), DOI: 10.5612/slavicreview.74.4.850.

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50 George Kennan, "A Ride through the Trans-Baikal," *Century*, May 1889.

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107 See, for example, *Waiter No. 5: A Story of Russian Despotism* (dir. D. W. Griffith, 1910); *Threads of Destiny* (dir. Joseph W. Smiley, 1914); *The Dancer's Ruse* (1915); *One Law for Both* (dir. Ivan Abramson, 1917).

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114 Chatterjee, "Imperial Incarcerations," 851. The fact that the conservative narratives simply exchanged the two regimes with one another, to support their agitation, does not mean that the hard labor camp systems did not continue to exist under the Bolsheviks.

115 When Breshkovsky came to the US in 1919, Helena Dudley "came bearing a letter from

Wald and Addams that begged Breshkovsky to stay out of American politics and speak only about 'neutral' topics—namely, the suffering of four million Russian war orphans." Gibson, "Russia's Martyr-Heroines," 265. But their efforts were in vain; Breshkvosky spoke before the Overman Committee, strongly arguing against the Bolsheviks. Another feminist protégé who became a powerful agitator against the Bolsheviks was Maria Bochkareva, who had formed the Women's Battalion of Death and fought in WWI. She fled from the Bolsheviks to America and met President Theodore Roosevelt, who was a critic of the Bolsheviks. Roosevelt donated a small sum of his Nobel Peace Prize money to Bochkareva's cause. See Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Random House, 2007), 502–503. With the help of the suffragist Florence Harriman, Bochkareva also got to speak with President Wilson, who concretized his plans for an America intervention in Siberia only several weeks later. See David S. Foglesong, *America's Secret War against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 162. Maria Bochkareva's book *Yashka: My Life as Peasant, Exile, and Soldier* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1919) supported American Red Terror discourses.

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"It sounds like *erasure*"

Mobility, Vulnerability, and Queer Coolitude Poetics in Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut*

Barbara Gfoellner

Abstract

In the Caribbean, im/mobilities linked to imperialism, colonialism, or recent forms of migration have created complex relations of vulnerability. This article examines human and more-than-human im/mobilities in the context of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and their relations of vulnerability in Rajiv Mohabir's poetry collection *The Taxidermist's Cut* (2016). The collection addresses the vulnerability of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and extends it to a shared more-than-human vulnerability by employing the practice of taxidermy as a figurative device to expose violences of oppressive and colonial regimes and their legacies today. These multiple vulnerabilities are related both to imperial im/mobilizations of peoples during the period of indentureship and to animals, on which taxidermy is performed, fixing their desired shape for eternity. This article reads *The Taxidermist's Cut* as a work that queers understandings of singular origin and binary classifications that serve to immobilize humans and non-humans alike. It then sheds light on how the art of taxidermy, with its colonial legacies, subversively applied as poetic tool, allows Mohabir to express shared vulnerabilities while generatively using them to resist colonial mechanisms of immobilization, fixation, and erasure.

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"It sounds like *erasure*"

Mobility, Vulnerability, and Queer Coolitude Poetics in Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut*

Barbara Gfoellner

Rajiv Mohabir is an Indo-Caribbean writer, born in London, UK, in 1981 to parents who immigrated from Guyana and who then moved to Toronto and Chuluota, Florida, during Mohabir's adolescent years. While moving between multiple places—also in his later years to India, Hawai'i, and New York—as a queer man of color, he continually renegotiated his positionality within these various localities. Mohabir situates his vulnerabilities at the intersections of being both racialized and sexualized: "To be a man of color is tough. To be a queer man of color is even tougher . . . I felt vulnerable being both."[1] Through his writing, he renegotiates these vulnerabilities: his body was exposed to discriminatory and sometimes violent practices within a predominantly white and heteronormative surrounding. Mohabir has written various poetry collections and a memoir (*Antiman* [2021]) that treat both the daily inner and outer conflicts of oppression, as well as the entangled hauntings and legacies of Indo-Caribbean histories. His debut poetry collection to be examined in this article—*The Taxidermist's Cut* (2016)—is a multilayered poetic grappling with bodily vulnerabilities. These are linked to Indo-Caribbean ancestral legacies of colonialism and imperialism, their afterlives today in racialized oppression within a white supremacist society, and the speaker's own self-destructive practices against his body.

The art and technique of taxidermy serves as a metaphor that explores—cuts open and stitches back together—the speaker's multiple vulnerabilities. As a practice of skinning animals, taxidermy exposes the violences of colonial practices and their continuing oppressive legacies in the poetry collection. Weaving images of taxidermy with self-harm, the poems express a wider relational vulnerability that also encompasses the more-than-human, engaging in the practice of what Donna Haraway terms "multispecies worlding."[2] Following Sara Ahmed's considerations on the skin "as the site of exposure or connectedness,"[3] this article reads the skin—of the taxidermied animal and of the (human) speaker—as a tissue connecting human with

more-than-human vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities are thus related to imperial im/mobilizations of peoples during the period of indentureship, as well as of animals, on which taxidermy was performed, immobilizing their desired shape for eternity. However, rather than perceiving these immobilizations as being fixed and determined, this article will distil the possibilities that are opened exactly through the exposure of these more-than-human vulnerabilities in the poems.

As Mohabir continues in the interview quoted above, "I felt vulnerable being both, but I also learned to be fierce, to survive like a coyote in a pack of wolves."[4] Setting vulnerabilities in relation to Indo-Caribbean and queer diasporic im/mobilities accordingly also enables a reading of these vulnerabilities as "a radical openness toward surprising possibilities . . .—as a space to work from as opposed to something only to be overcome."[5] By applying a mobility studies lens, this article will first explore the unevenness of vulnerabilities in the context of Indo-Caribbean im/mobilities before demonstrating how vulnerability functions as a relational potentiality through which a more-than-human poetics is articulated in *The Taxidermist's Cut*.

Indo-Caribbean Im/Mobilities and Vulnerabilities

The Caribbean has been shaped by various human and nonhuman im/mobilities connected to colonialism and imperialism. Many of these im/mobilities were precariously linked to exploitation for the advancement of capitalism. Cedric Robinson's term "racial capitalism" illustrates how the exploitation of racialized labor put a capitalist system into place that was dependent on the increased mobility of peoples and goods.[6] The Caribbean and its plantations played a pivotal role in the advancement of capitalism through exploited labor and the concomitant rise in power of colonial empires such as Great Britain and France. After the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century, the introduction of indentureship responded to a shortage of labor. More than a million workers, especially from India (the largest group), China, and Indonesia were shipped to European colonies such as the Caribbean, including British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica, to work on sugar plantations.[7] This transoceanic crossing, referred to as *kala pani* ("black waters"), had special significance as a transformative journey: traversing the waters meant the loss or dispersal of cultural, religious, familial, or caste ties, while the classifications into which one was born—like rigid social hierarchies determined by the caste system in India—were renegotiated. Beyond loss, this migratory experience also represented a cut from rigid confinements of the native country.[8]

The arrival of indentured workers in the Caribbean was firmly linked to a desired smooth continuation and promotion of exploitation and capitalism. Asian workers carried the stigma of commodity status: "The Indian was perceived, consequently,

as a lackey of capitalism whose presence perpetuated coercive, unequal labour relations and inhibited the growth of an independent peasantry."[9] The indentured laborer was seen as the one furthering an exploitative and capitalist system, of which slavery was the precursory stage. As Lisa Lowe writes, Asian indentured laborers—referred to as "coolies"[10]—became the "*figure* introducing this alleged transition from slavery to freedom."[11]

While the mobility of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora was motivated by a desire for economic stability, this did not occur entirely voluntarily, as it threw people into complex relations of dependency. Indentureship was considered a form of bound labor; workers were assigned to plantations from which they were not allowed to leave, being bound to a contract with a duration of at least five years.[12] Rather than forwarding a romanticized view of free mobility and nomadism, mobility scholarship has drawn attention to different forms of mobility and immobility, which are always implicated in "the production and distribution of power," influencing and being influenced by social relations, such as relations between classes, caste, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and nationalities.[13] Seeing mobilities merely in terms of voluntary and free agency easily obliterates complex power relations that channel these im/mobilities according to a dominant group's interests.

The system of indentureship was based on what Cotten Seiler refers to as "racialization of mobility," as certain mobilities and immobilities were controlled and monitored based on people's race and ethnicity.[14] Mobility is differentially distributed, thereby producing uneven mobilities, which are shaped by unequal relations of power; the question as to who, and what, can move freely must thus be situated within histories of slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy.[15] Mobilities such as those of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora are relationally produced through their entanglement with other human and nonhuman im/mobilities: the—often not entirely voluntary—mobility through displacement across the ocean of one group propelled the prosperity of another group. Vulnerabilities produced through im/mobilities thus always have to be located in their specific historical and political contexts and their wider global relations, which—in this article—speak to diasporas at large and the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in particular. In other words, vulnerabilities are a product of what Lowe calls the "intimacies of four continents," drawing together the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, alongside their intimate imperial relations of colonialism and its legacies.[16]

Indentureship created precarious forms of im/mobility: while indentured workers moved across the ocean, hoping for social and economic upward mobility, the laborers were simultaneously tied to relations of dependency; in a sense, they were fixed in place. Their vulnerability was not only constituted by these relations, but these relations also dispossessed them, as they entered into what Butler refers to as "a

mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another."[17]

Mobilities in this respect might also engender vulnerability, rather than wealth and freedom, with the extent of one's vulnerability being distributed unevenly. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay argue for an understanding of vulnerability and invulnerability as being "politically produced, unequally distributed through and by a differential operation of power."[18] Perceiving vulnerability as an essential "part of social relations" defies any quick blame of a subject's vulnerability to the individual and instead embeds it into a wider web of power relations. Under the premise that vulnerabilities, along with mobilities, are relational, this article focuses on the diasporic and more-than-human bonds that define the self and its surroundings.

In her book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), Butler makes the expansive claim that vulnerability needs to be seen "as a feature of our shared or interdependent lives," and, thus, a "relational understanding of vulnerability shows that we are not altogether separable from the conditions that make our lives possible or impossible. In other words, because we cannot exist liberated from such conditions, we are never fully individuated."[19] While vulnerability necessarily has to be thought of as relational, these relations are themselves vulnerable. In the Caribbean context, relations of vulnerability evoke violent modes of rendering colonial subjects transparent and fungible for slavery or intendured labor.[20] However, these newly formed relations through historical and present experiences of mobility and cultural encounters—creolization—also hold the possibility for multiple generative formations that create anew. Martinican writer Édouard Glissant speaks of capital "R" "Relation" as this generative site that allows for differences and fluidities, for "each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open."[21] Relation is thus not restrictive or oppressive, but Glissant articulates the concept of a "Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."[22] Theorizing vulnerability as "Relation" in a Glissantian sense, Guillermina de Ferrari refers to his notion of opacity: "Invoking its right to opacity, however, the contemporary Caribbean subject lays claim to its own materiality as a disidentification with the traces imprinted on the body. The vulnerability of the body thus becomes a condition of possibility of emancipation from colonialism at the cultural and social levels."[23] In this article, the skin—as part of the body that is not only vulnerable to direct outer harm but which also protects that which lies inside—is key to theorizing vulnerability, which necessarily must be understood as relational. These relations can be harnessed as forms of liberation from oppressive conditions, transcending—or queering—violent structures and categorizations into which one has been placed.

Queer Coolitude Poetics

Mohabir's poems disrupt violent relations of power through the queering of rigid boundaries of binary categories, echoing Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's notion of "queering" as "marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so."[24] Gayatri Gopinath carves out an understanding of "aesthetic practices of queer diaspora"—that is, practices that "emerge out of, and respond to, the legacies of the colonial labor relations that tie Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas to each other; such legacies include the dispossession of indigenous peoples, postcolonial nationalisms, and the diasporas of racialized, migrant labor."[25] Queerness, then, offers ways not only to contend with such violent legacies, enducing uneven vulnerabilities, but also to cut through these ties to produce something new.

Rajiv Mohabir's *The Taxidermist's Cut* can be read as an example of an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora. Blurring human and nonhuman boundaries, *The Taxidermist's Cut* "disrupt[s] the normative ways of seeing and knowing that have been so central to the production, containment, and disciplining of sexual, racial, and gendered bodies," to draw on Gopinath.[26] Moreover, this disruption is done "through a particular deployment of queer desire and identification that renders apparent the promiscuous intimacies of our past histories as they continue to structure our everyday present, and determine our futures."[27] Mohabir's poetics is a form of queer expression anchored in diasporic histories of indentureship. He inscribes his writing in a "Coolitude" inheritance, a term coined by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully in 1992 to evoke diasporic histories of indentured migration across the globe, while creating a bond with other communities enduring colonial oppression, like the African diaspora.[28] The "coolie," as argued by Torabully, stands between relations of "the Master and the Slave" and has often been silenced—becoming "*l'être sans parole* (wordless being)." However, as the "third chaotic presence," the coolie unsettles binary oppositions.[29] Rajiv Mohabir's writing as a Coolitude poetics queers binaries and transcends national affiliation to build solidarity across borders: "My coolitude allows me to struggle with others in their fight for sovereignty . . . *My coolitude allows me to see and relate to the suffering of colonized people around me*." Thus, fundamentally building his Coolitude on diasporic relations, Mohabir's poetics are infused with mobility: "*My coolitude is forever movement*."[30] It is through this continuous mobility that the poems in *The Taxidermist's Cut* negotiate individual vulnerabilities of their speaker, thereby connecting them to a collective and shared human, as well as a more-than-human vulnerability.

Vulnerability of the Skin in Taxidermy

Vulnerability, seen as a condition shared among humans and the more-than-human alike, is shaped by colonial practices and mobility regimes that exerted control not only by mobilizing species, bringing them to new places, but also by immobilizing them, fixing them at specific locations, thus channeling their movement or stasis. *The Taxidermist's Cut* works against immobilization and fixations of humans and animals by disposing of the vulnerabilities linked to colonialism and its legacies. Instead of figuring vulnerability as an obstacle that must be overcome, the poems harness and expand it across time and space, the human and more-than-human, transforming vulnerability into "a radical openness toward surprising possibilities."[31] Opening vulnerability to other possibilities makes space for multiple histories, rather than a teleological understanding of a linear history that erases any non-Western versions, as outlined by Gopinath:

> The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora conjure these minor histories into being and make them apparent. Their value lies in their ability to demand that we look beyond the main event and instead become attuned to submerged and forgotten modes of longing, desire, affiliation, and embodiment that may in fact allow us to envision an alternative present and future. As such, these aesthetic practices enact a queer mode of critique that demands a retraining of our vision and a reattunement of our senses, and in so doing point to the limits of the entire apparatus of vision that is the inheritance of colonial modernity.[32]

Mohabir's Coolitude poetics reattunes the senses from a hegemonic colonial apparatus of vision, which tends to create a singular narrative through clear categorization and objectification, to one that pays heed to submerged and erased histories. As the poet writes in his "Coolitude Manifesto," "*My coolitude is queer, upsetting binaries and status quo. I am a dark body that bounces back from extinction's brink, almost hunted into ghost by whalers and colonizers alike who both built their empires on trying to eliminate my dreaming and imagination*."[33] Animal vulnerabilities of extinction are closely linked to human vulnerabilities of erasure, the eradication of Indigenous peoples as well as of displaced peoples' memories and cultures. Yet, words inscribed on the page of Mohabir's poems challenge this erasure to speak for other possibilities.

The body, in Mohabir's poems, becomes a material body marked by the traces of colonial history, symbolized by the cuts and marks on the skin inflicted by the taxidermist. Yet, the body also resists through these persisting marks on the skin. The skin, the prime site for the practice of taxidermy, functions as a connecting tissue between human and more-than-human vulnerabilities in *The Taxidermist's Cut*. The poems' speaker transcends categories of the human, as they merge with animals

and relate their endured violences and experiences to those of living and taxidermied animals. Taxidermy, the practice of cutting a body open and stitching it back together, serves as the book's symbolical vehicle to expose and make opaque the vulnerabilities of the speaker and, consequently, their intimate surroundings.

Derived from ancient Greek, the word taxidermy is a compound of "taxi" (to arrange) and "dermis" (skin), literally describing the "arrangement" of skin. While anthropologists commonly date the first practices of taxidermy to the time of ancient Egypt, coeval with mummification,[34] one of the main differences between the two is their distinct treatment of the skin: in the former, the skin is cut and then stitched together, after the insides have been removed, while "mummification leaves the skin intact and in place."[35] The vulnerability of the skin is thus central to the practice of taxidermy, constituting a vulnerable boundary between what is inside and outside the body. As the outer layer of the animal, the skin is vulnerable to the cuts and openings of the taxidermist, rendering the animal fully transparent through exposure. Hence, the skin both exposes and hides, as well as protects. While dressing the animal—sewing up and reassembling body parts—is an important part of the practice, taxidermy always leaves its traces, albeit sometimes invisible, on the body. Sara Ahmed speaks of encounters of the skin as a "*contact zone of impressions*," arguing that the skin not only "separates us from others [but] also connects us to others." Any "marks" impressed upon the body remain as hauntings: "The impressions of others surface as marks on the body, in which the marks become a sign of absence, or a sign of a presence that 'is no longer.'"[36]

However, while the skin as the outer layer may directly be exposed to assaults or cuts, there is also a "perceived need to care for the skin, a sense of its vulnerability and exposure."[37] In taxidermy, careful preservation of the skin is of utmost importance. As valuable objects of interest, techniques to preserve the skin became essential and served to recreate animal specimen "as if still alive,"[38] exposing a desire to control and immobilize the animal body, which is also firmly baked into a colonial system. "In this context," Pauline Wakeham notes, "taxidermy functions as a powerful nodal point in a matrix of racial and species discourses, narratives of disappearance and extinction, and tropes of aboriginality that have been crucial to the maintenance of colonial power in Canada and the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present."[39]

Taxidermy holds the tension between life and death, mortality and immortality, keeping the "semblance of life in death."[40] In an eerie sense, it tries to work against erasure, voicing a longing for the reversal of species extinction, largely due to human interventions, by preserving its *breathless* bodies for a desired eternity.[41] Taxidermy is thus embedded in a colonial system that fixes and immobilizes its object into a

desired shape, rendering it a product of colonial intimacies.[42] As the guiding thread in Mohabir's poetry collection, the art of taxidermy reveals, displays, and obscures multiple vulnerabilities through complex and fraught interrelations of im/mobilities.

Queering Taxidermy: Shared Interspecies Vulnerabilities

As a metaphor, taxidermy blurs human/animal boundaries and exposes "shared physical and ontological vulnerabilities concealed by the naturalization of past human/animal institutionalized relationships."[43] Multispecies worlding forms one of the book's main principles, as it allows readers to understand more-than-human vulnerabilities; it renders possible an active engagement with enmeshed relationships between the human and more-than-human. However, as these relationships metamorphose into forms of "becoming-with" in *The Taxidermist's Cut*, they become *inter*species worldings: "Becoming is always becoming *with*—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake."[44] In the poetry collection, animals are immobilized, fixed, and made vulnerable to the taxidermist's cut, as through direct instructions on how to perform taxidermy. Taxidermy serves as a tool not only to explore the various types of violence inflicted upon both the animal and the human but also to think through how these openings are sewed up again.

The merging of human/animal relations and vulnerabilities can be analyzed through the speaker position and mode of address used in the poems. The line "Let's pretend you are going hunting" opens the collection, introducing the address of the second-person "you" as characteristic to the book.[45] The appeal conveys the impression of an internal monologue, suggesting that the speaker simultaneously becomes the addressee. Through this mode of address, the "I" swiftly transitions into the "you," the human into animal, taxidermist into taxidermied, thereby fusing both the violence inflicted on the speaker/animal and the violence the speaker enacts on themselves. Taxidermy serves as a vehicle to explore an external violence directed at the self; the collection thus deconstructs the practice of taxidermy to disclose vulnerabilities of animals and humans alike.

In the poems, immobilization often works through objectification. In the opening poem, "Preface," the speaker instructs the reader on hunting strategies and methods of taxidermy, training their gaze on the desired trophy: "You look first at the wandering deer, the bigger prize, / full of meat, with hide to cure, but keep an eye / peeled for upland birds too, smaller, / easier to mount once ensnared."[46] Even before being hunted, the living animal is objectified by the hunter's gaze, its value weighed by its size and flesh, as well as the complexity of the mounting process. Vulnerable to the human gaze, relations of dominion are established during the hunt, between humans and animals alike, as well as in terms of cultural and political relationships, as

Poliquin explains: "Traditionally trophies spelled out a hunter's rights over particular geographic terrains as much as human mastery over beast."[47]

In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the speaker's shifting positionalities complicate power relations and defy definite objectification, while rejecting clear human/animal hierarchies. Adding another layer of ambiguity, the speaker takes on the instructive voice of the taxidermist, marked in italics: "*Yes*, I said, / *birds are easy to work with, refugee bones* / *that gift flight, delicate and slight,* / *may as well be shadow.*"[48] By adopting the taxidermist's voice, power relations constantly shift to challenge the superiority of the taxidermist, as well as to reverse the vulnerable position of the animal.

The concluding lines of the poem put the speaker back into a vulnerable object position: "I have always / made myself invisible. I mean to say / I am still—this trembling breath of a comma, / this coincidental object of your want."[49] Invisibility becomes the animal's form of resistance, which, as a desired hunting object, eludes the hunter's gaze. Visually fixing, oftentimes exhibiting, preserved specimens is one of taxidermy's foremost motivations: "The fact that we are born and inevitably disappear defines us, organically speaking. Taxidermy exists because of life's inevitable trudge towards dissolution . . . The desire to hold something back from this inevitable course and to savor its form *in perpetuum* exhibits a peculiar sort of desire."[50] Invisibility, for the speaker, is essential to resist that very immobilization. However, invisibility is a double-edged sword, a necessary means to escape immobilization, and yet the speaker clearly needs to assert their existence: "I am still—." The double meaning of the word "still," evoking both persistence and stillness, foregrounds a troubled subject/object position: *still* as persistence within ongoing conditions of oppression, prolonged by the use of a dash, yet defying stasis.

This ambiguous relationship with invisibility parallels Glissant's affirmation of a subject's "right to opacity": colonialism operates on the desire to make its objects transparent and legible in terms of a hegemonic Western logic, by extension, rendering subjects vulnerable to imposed—often binary—classifications.[51] Taxidermy follows in a similar logic: by rendering the living, moving, and thus elusive, animal immobile, it can become intelligible, as Mohabir explains in an interview: "Taxidermy is bending the body of a being into the taxidermist's reading of that body—fixing its pose in time, subtracting any sovereignty of the creatures fixed in motion. In this way, sovereignty is personal albeit vulnerable to the desires of those who would manipulate another's body."[52] Opacity, however, allows a subject to exist in an ambiguous in-between position of invisibility and persistence, laying claim to its own existence while reserving its right to not make itself fully transparent. The speaker expresses their right for opacity by playing with the ambiguity of words, signalling the impossibility of fixing the body or of full comprehension: "Whether you catch me or not is not

the point."[53] Rather than rendering oneself intelligible within binary categories such as human/nonhuman, Mohabir's poetics complicates anthropocentric agency and, instead, carves out the possibilities of "becoming-with," which speaks to a shared interspecies vulnerability.

Erasure and Preservation: "It sounds like *erasure*"

Taxidermy is a work of precision, carefully considering each cut to open the animal's skin without harming its outside, taking its insides out, to be replaced with foam, resin, wood, plaster, or clay, to then stitch it back together into the desired form, and finally preserving it to last in its new environment.[54] These cuts, however, leave traces on the body. Mohabir's poems reflect on taxidermy as a process of both erasure and preservation.

The titular poem, "The Taxidermist's Cut," and a set of poems subtitled "(Erasure Poem)" take and restitch words from taxidermy manuals to provide instructions on how to prepare a corpse. "*Lay the coyote / on the skinning table*," the speaker instructs, foreshadowing the opening of the animal body.[55] Laid bare on the skinning table, the animal's vulnerability becomes manifest through the opening of the skin and the exposure of its insides. In other words, it is rendered fully transparent to the taxidermist's gaze and subjected to their whims, taking out body parts that no longer serve the taxidermist's purpose. Mohabir poetically links what is called field dressing in taxidermy with colonial practices that caused erasure. By using the manuals' words—cutting out exact sentences and phrases and putting them into new contexts within the poems—Mohabir performatively dismantles the violence that comes along with erasure. While some parts are erased, others are carefully preserved. In the poem "Preservation (Erasure Poem)," the paradox in its title alludes to the double entendre of taxidermy, as some lines taken from Montagu Browne's taxidermy guide *Practical Taxidermy* (1884) are placed within the longer sentences of a poem: "Seize the bird by the sides, / insert poisons and other pain."[56] Adding the second line to the manual's instructions, the speaker writes themselves into the practice of taxidermy, as if to add subtler meanings of the practice, doubled by the alliteration and felt by those objectified. Poetry, then, becomes a craft of using raw materials and arranging them into new contexts to refine their meaning; the speaker turns into the taxidermist who decides what to erase and what to preserve.

Ultimately, the poems speak to various forms of erasure: erasure of the self and its identities—queer and ethnic—and its larger diasporic and interspecies vulnerabilities. As Mohabir writes elsewhere, "I see my first person as an assertion against empire, a way to un-erase memory, a decolonial act. How can a brown queer speak?"[57] In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the "brown queer" speaks through one of the most prominent ani-

mals in the poems, the coyote, which is objectified and made vulnerable to the taxidermist's cut, a cut that tries to rearrange and categorize its complexities. However, the text's constant movement resists the taxidermist's actions. Given colonialism's histories of erasure—both of living beings and their cultural traces—linked to genocide and forceful displacement, persistence has been both a necessary and rebellious act. The poems counter fixation and erasure by using the traces of living beings to un-erase memory and to recreate an identity through mobility.

Queering Purity Through Mobility

Against the backdrop of immobilization through objectification and erasure, Rajiv Mohabir carves out a poetics of mobility, one that moves through personal and collective histories, as well as beyond rigid confines of bounded affiliation. By linking indentured Indo-Caribbean mobilities and mobilities of migration to the US, the poems illustrate how these mobilities are relational, bound by a sense of shared vulnerability across generations, species, time, and space.

In the book, the figure of the coyote—as an animal both alive and preserved—exemplifies these complex relations. The coyote represents the speaker's hybrid identities, evoking both its Native American symbolism as trickster figure and Haraway's use of the coyote to disrupt rigid nature/culture boundaries. For Haraway, the coyote "is about the world as a place that is active in terms that are not particularly under human control, but it is not about the human, on the one side, and the natural, on the other. There is a communication between what we would call 'nature' and 'culture,' but in a world where 'coyote' is a relevant category, 'nature' and 'culture' are not the relevant categories. Coyote disturbs nature/culture ontologies."[58] Thus, the coyote resists clear (anthropocentric) categorization; instead, it disrupts and confuses linear genealogy, creating alternative understandings of human/nonhuman bodies and relations.

Throughout the collection, the speaker and the coyote merge into one; *becoming-with* the coyote, the speaker defies fixed identities. The collection's titular poem—which stretches across several pages to explore themes of racial, bodily, and animal violence through the tool of taxidermy—juxtaposes the speaker's background of displacement with the coyote's. The first line explains: "Your great grandparents traveled kalapani from India to South America." The poem then outlines the speaker's migration to Chuluota, establishing a link between their transnational mobilities by referring to "Florida's black water," which "flows northward" and which is not only the name of a river in Florida but also the literal translation of "kala pani." The last line of the poem fuses these human traces with the coyote, as "canid footprints trail yours."[59]

This fusion between the human and the non-human provides a transition to the following page, which outlines the coyote's presence and value in Florida. Visually, the prose poem's layout—two longer coherent paragraphs, interrupted by one shorter sentence—creates a link between the pages, allowing for a comparison between human and nonhuman experiences of mobility. The coyote's background, similarly, is one of displacement: "*Canis latrans* are new to Florida." Yet, for the animal, in contrast to the speaker, displacement is linked to assimilation: "They adapt easily, experts at elusion." For the coyote, assimilation comes at a certain cost, as the animal continuously oscillates between being alive and dead, made clear by a sudden change in the following sentence: "Their pelts hang by the dozens at the Sanford / Flea Market—hated for being exotic, invasive, and competition for jobs."[60] The animal, now in death, is defined by the value of its hide. Killed by "the dozens," its monetary value is decreased to the point that it ends up being sold at flea markets. The dash extends these animal vulnerabilities in commercial spaces to those of humans, alluding to both the exploitative coyote system and aggressions directed at immigrants who come to work in the US, joining the "competition for jobs." This evokes the disparaging stigma of Indo-Caribbean people on the labor market from its origins: frowned upon as "lackey of capitalism" during indentureship on the plantation, feared for taking away jobs today in the US.[61] While faced with these reproaches, the Indo-Caribbean speaker is merely a victim of this exploitative machinery, even standing at the very bottom of this ladder: "But you are not from the subcontinent and you don't descend from first- / wave doctors and lawyers, but from illiterate farmers who were once slaves / in the sugarcane fields for the East India Company."[62] The poem links the coyote's and the Indo-Caribbean descendant's vulnerabilities to capitalism and commercialization, highlighting their precarious positions in their respective environments, intricately linked to past colonial violence.

Alluding to the "coolie's" precarious position in society—often obliterated from discourse in the Caribbean context and not accepted as being fully Indian by other Indian immigrants in the US—the coyote, as a trickster figure, becomes an apt representation of the speaker in the text. It creates confusion due to its mobility and hybrid identity. Opposite the disdained coyote stands the figure of the wolf, which represents direct Indian origin, one that can be more easily traced. The speaker's Indo-Caribbean descent is addressed in "*Canis Latrans*," a poem problematizing singular belonging. Bearing the Latin binomial term for coyote as its title, the poem alludes to the attempt of categorization through naming, yet eludes clear identification through negation: "Do not mistake yourself / for a wolf, your plantation days / of illiterate indenture still / dusk the horizon."[63]

The coyote symbolizes misrecognition, too easily mistaken for an Indian, yet is clearly marked as Indo-Caribbean by their ancestors' work on the plantation. Inden-

tureship, described as "illiterate," calls attention to another marker of discrimination—class and caste—and alludes to the social and economic background of those laborers who decided to enter indentureship. Implied is the superiority of clear origin—or pure breed—over a hybridized identity, which in the poem is linked to deception ("camouflage," "misread," "mistake yourself"), presupposing an essentialist conception of cultures being fixed and local. Yet, the idea of culture as fixed in place is itself a myth, as Greenblatt reminds us: "One of the characteristic powers of a culture is its ability to hide the mobility that is its enabling condition."[64] For the Indo-Caribbean speaker, identity cannot be built on affiliation to any single nation or ethnic group; in queering purity—of both the coyote and the Indo-Caribbean self—the speaker's identity relies on mobility rather than fixity.

In "The Taxidermist's Cut," erasure is linked to racism experienced through the Ku Klux Klan in Florida ("where active members of the Klan rally"). The speaker again ponders their own erasure: "It tries to erase you still, though you cannot hide brown skin and burnt / cumin in Chuluota." Erasure is denied, as any movement leaves its traces: "On the banks of the river, the wet sand keeps a record of all who pass."[65] These traces exist and persist as hauntings; as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, speaking about historical loss, "The production of traces is always also the creation of silences."[66] The wet sand resists complete erasure, memorizing any passing movement. As Glissant writes of the Caribbean, "Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history."[67]

These traces can also be read as mobile ways of resisting external attempts of fixation and erasure of the self, as in the poem "The Complete Tracker." Against the backdrop of ancestral mobilities, the speaker sets out to uncover their traces, yet they merely exist as half-sunken remnants of the past: "I trek the wreckage of myths: / toadstools on a felled tree." Thus, any mobility, albeit nonlinear, leaves its traces, as a taxidermy guidebook ensures, "*Every creature / that moves on earth leaves / a mark of its passing*, though the trails are seldom linear."[68] The speaker's mobility can be described in Glissant's sense of errantry, a kind of wandering without clear origin or endpoint, yet one that is based on Relation, building its rhizomatic identity on this very movement, on routes rather than roots. Refusing to be tracked at any one place, errantry allows for opacity and, thus, intelligibility of the speaker's traces: "Your footprints are covered over / by leaves and other men's heavy soles."[69] For indentured Indians, the kala pani crossing most strikingly symbolizes the dissolving of fixed affiliation, recreating relations through mobilities rather than through fixed identities. *Kala pani* therefore lies at the heart of the meaning of Coolitude: "By making the crossing central, Coolitude avoids my essentialism and connection with an idealized Mother India, which is clearly left behind. It discloses the Coolie's story which has been shipwrecked ('erased') in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse."[70]

The skin is particularly vulnerable to predetermined classifications, as it racially marks the body as Other. Existing in Ahmed's "contact zone of impressions," it evokes prior historical encounters that shape enduring impressions of and upon the skin. Pejoratively defined from the outside, the coyote is seen as forgery, a chimera of the wolf: "You are a coyote / in wolf's clothes."[71] In "*Canis Latrans*," misrecognition is visually and sonically determined by skin and voice: "your skin / sings one song while people hear / another."[72] The sensual distortion of the skin, singing and being heard, constructs a synaesthesia, similar to the alienation experienced by the speaker: seemingly opposing entities are put together, ones that diverge from normative understandings of nationality or ethnicity. The repeated use of the word "hide" and its ambiguous meaning—either as animal skin or to conceal oneself—illustrates the close connection of the skin and erasure and links it to taxidermy. Struggling with misrecognition, the poem reads, "You cannot change your hide— / your parents are not from India."[73] The *hide* becomes a central marker for the speaker's vulnerability: while it represents a desire for escape and shelter, this is simultaneously denied due to the skin's persistence. Yet, the skin, here, needs to be seen in its double valence: not merely as a neutral outer layer that protects from outer impact on the skin but also, in Ahmed's sense, as "a surface that is felt only in the event of being 'impressed upon' in the encounters we have with others." Thus, not only does the skin persist but past encounters also *impress upon* the skin: "The impression is a sign of the persistence of others even in the face of their absence. The skin may in this way record past impressions, past encounters with others, who are others insofar as they have already made an impression. Hence the very impression of the skin surface is itself an effect of impressions."[74]

In *The Taxidermist's Cut*, the skin is subjected to a great deal of violence. As the largest organ constituting the outer layer of the body, it is particularly vulnerable to direct outer harm. The titular poem, "The Taxidermist's Cut," exposes the vulnerability of the skin, as taxidermy is performed on the animal—the coyote—as well as the self. Instructions from a manual carefully direct the process:

Remember not to cut
through more skin
than is necessary,
as you will have to sew

up the holes you make
along the way—[75]

These lines describing the performance of taxidermy are short; most sentences are broken up into enjambments and are indented, so as to slowly guide the reader

through the process. Violence inflicted upon the self is not italicized but is equally phrased as instruction: "Pick up the razor. / It sounds like *erasure*."[76]

Shifting between the manual's instructions on performing taxidermy on the coyote and the speaker's own cutting, equally described in taxidermy terminology, the poem queers—disrupts and destabilizes—bodily boundaries and relations as well as notions of purity by merging the human and non-human. Physical violence inflicted on the animal and the self speaks to a wider, more subtle, epistemological, and racial violence that contributes to vulnerability and erasure. Once opened, the speaker's body is stitched back together, covered anew: "Cover your own skin with the hide that does not hide. Place your arms / and legs in the empty pelt and sew yourself up."[77] Complete erasure of their outside is denied, skillfully emphasized by the homophone/homograph that underlines the impossibility to *hide* underneath a different skin.

Ultimately, the speaker alludes to the taxidermist's attempts to preserve and fix the animal. In "Field Care," the speaker explains, "No matter how well you prepare / this memory, doctored to reshape / my chest against your back, / I am not inside that skin you fix."[78] In the last line, the speaker escapes the taxidermist's cut by asserting their elusiveness. Thereby, they resist the taxidermist's fixation and recording of memory as well, claiming its right to opacity, to gaps and openings that exist within the self and one's ancestors' histories. In his "Coolitude Manifesto," Mohabir uses the image of the skin to express his interaction with the wider world; here, belonging is defined in terms of mobility and multiplicity:

> *My skin adapts to the world around, the element of its place. It is my skin, supported and given shape by my ancestry that allows me to ally with others in the spaces that I enter. I am a queer citizen of motion and movement. My home is in journey. My ancestors migrate with me as I learn and resing old sohar, kajari, and bhajans, and my skin changes as I learn how to move through unforeseeable currents. I belong nowhere and everywhere. Indeed, the idea of a native country means stasis and I am in constant motion. I am descended from survivors. In fact, my first instinct is to survive—and this is ancestral.*[79]

While heightened mobility of displacement and migration has put Caribbean people into vulnerable positions, survival—and thus persistence—is also anchored in the possibilities opened through that mobility. In his manifesto, Mohabir gives the skin a new meaning, one that does not bind him to any nation state, yet creates a deep ancestral bond. The skin refuses to be fixed, erased, or immobilized; instead, it moves with the mobility of the self and thereby allows him to adapt and relate to more than a singular human being. As Mohabir further proclaims, "The India we were once from is no longer the center of our travail, rather, what we center now is our dynamism, our

movement, our multiple belongings."[80] These multiple belongings extend to a shared sense of vulnerability, one that, in *The Taxidermist's Cut*, merges with animal vulnerabilities. As a response to the various immobilizations of humans and non-humans linked to colonialism and its legacies—ones related to the performance of taxidermy in the book—the poems then move out of this fixation by opening up the vulnerabilities of the self to other possibilities. As an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora, *The Taxidermist's Cut* transgresses various established boundaries through the conceptual metaphor of taxidermy, queering notions of purity linked to humans and non-humans.

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Notes

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20 Saidiya V. Hartman describes "fungibility" as "exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

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25 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

26 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 7.

27 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 7.

28 Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, 143. The word "Coolitude" is an Indo-Caribbean answer to former Caribbean cultural and literary movements, such as "négritude" and "créolité." The latter emerged from the French Caribbean and African diaspora and attempted to emphasize African ancestries of the Caribbean, yet largely leaves out Caribbean peoples of Asian descent. Coolitude thus brings the Indo-Caribbean dimension to light.

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36 Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin*, 10.

37 Ahmed and Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin*, 10.

38 Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo*, 23.

39 Pauline Wakeham, *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6.

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42 It was in the sixteenth century, and particularly during the Victorian era, that taxidermy became popular in Europe, linked to heightened mobility of seafaring and "exploration" as well as a mounting interest in the natural world. Species were often hunted and removed from their place of origin—mostly "exotic" creatures that could serve as trophies brought by "explorers" to Europe—to be then preserved and displayed for those who stayed put to see. The act of collecting plants and animals was intricately interwoven with the larger colonial practices of conquest and control. See Marbury, *Taxidermy Art*, 9; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso Books, 1993), 17.

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77 Mohabir, *The Taxidermist's Cut*, 32.

78 Mohabir, *The Taxidermist's Cut*, 42–43.

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"Brown Babies" in Post-WWII Denmark

A Case Study of the Vulnerabilities of Adopted Children Born of War

Martina Koegeler-Abdi

Abstract

Children born to occupying soldiers and members of a local population during or after conflicts are in many ways an extraordinarily vulnerable population. These so-called children born of war (CBOW) commonly inherit the stigma of transgression and foreignness from their respective parents and face discrimination in post-conflict societies. Their specific vulnerabilities, though, emerge from multiple overlapping factors: the needs and social status of their family members, their relation to the trans/national communities of their parents as well as to ethno-national norms of belonging. This paper theorizes the multiple factors that shaped the vulnerabilities of biracial adoptees in post-WWII Denmark as Black *and* German children of fraternizing mothers. I look at a case from the Danish "child import," the illegal adoptions of children born to African American soldiers and German women in late 1950s Denmark, in relation to the testimony of an adopted child born to a German soldier in Denmark during WWII. The similarities and differences between the two testimonies show that the "imported" biracial children did not just face specific racial vulnerabilities at this intersection between US American and Danish adoption histories but also a relational vulnerability tied to their CBOW status, which manifested through the slow violence of family secrecy practices.

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"Brown Babies" in Post-WWII Denmark

A Case Study of the Vulnerabilities of Adopted Children Born of War

Martina Koegeler-Abdi

> He [her math teacher] hated Germans. He used to talk a lot about the Second World War, and every time he did so he pointed always at me and said that I was a *tyskertøs* [a German girl].
>
> Regina Juul Søresensen, Danish adoptee born to an African American soldier and a German woman.[1]

Denmark was the second-largest destination country for adoptions of biracial children from US-occupied Germany in the late 1950s, after the US itself.[2] The existence of children born to German women and African American soldiers shaped post-WWII transatlantic racial histories. Scholarship on Black "occupation children" has focused on these children's highly symbolic role in post-war Germany, on the children's experiences with racism in Germany, and their transnational adoptions to the US or the UK.[3] Jim Crow policies in the segregated US army directly affected these children: it made marriage between African American soldiers and German women impossible, thereby denying the children US citizenship and the women alimony.[4] The discontent of returning African American soldiers who could not claim their children born overseas was also crucial to US civil rights work against Jim Crow laws in the United States.[5] The prominent Danish involvement in these early transnational adoption schemes, though, has received little attention outside of Denmark. Danish parents illegally adopted 2000–3000 children, born to African American soldiers and German women during the Allied occupation, under the guidance of the Danish adoption activist Tytte Botfelt between 1956 and 1964.[6] The Danish state did not support these adoptions, but it did not prevent them either. Danish parents seeking to adopt without long waiting times would drive across the border into Germany, pick up a biracial child from a foster home or orphanage and

bring it back to Denmark, where they would eventually be legalized after the fact—a phenomenon dubbed the "child import," *Børneimporten*, by the local press.[7]

The Danish "child import" was supposed to save the children from both German and American racism. According to Heide Fehrenbach, the German government justified these improvised adoptions to Denmark by framing the nation as a racially liberal utopia, superior to the segregated US for the children's well-being.[8] Botfelt, who had adopted a biracial child herself in 1956, echoed this sentiment, as any family in Denmark, in her eyes, would have been better for the children's well-being than remaining in Germany.[9] She then supported thousands of parents with her expertise and contacts, against the wishes of the justice ministry. Her semi-secret operations continued for nearly eight years. The justice ministry only regularized the transnational adoption procedures through NGOs in 1964, after a series of scandals forced the ministry to publicly recognize that these adoptions had, in fact, taken place.[10] In hindsight, it is impossible to say which placement—in Denmark, in Germany or in the US—would have been better for an individual child's welfare. The 35 testimonies of now adult adoptees, collected and published by the journalists Amalie Linde, Matilde Hørmand-Pallesen, and Amalie Kønigsfeldt in their 2013 publication *Børneimporten*, show at any rate that the actual experience of biracial adoptees in Denmark was far from utopic—they faced racism, neglect, and, at times, abuse that went undetected, as there was no official oversight. And in other cases, the placement could also work out well. What testimonies like Regina's in the epigraph above do show is that the adoptees did not escape their racial vulnerability. On the contrary, they instead encountered new, overlapping forms of vulnerability, being stigmatized as Black, German, and a "child born of war" (CBOW) to a fraternizing mother in post-WWII Denmark.

This essay contributes new perspectives to the racialization of Afro German adoptees in post-WWII Denmark through the lens of vulnerability studies. My focus is twofold: first, I analyze how the children's German heritage shaped their racial vulnerabilities as adoptees in Denmark. Regina's experience asks us to reconsider the enduring influence of Nazi German racial ideologies outside Germany, especially in formerly Nazi-occupied European territories—like Denmark—and their intersections with the transnational reach of Jim Crow in Euro-American adoption histories. In a next step, I then explore how these racial vulnerabilities interacted with forms of relational vulnerabilities for CBOW adoptees—specifically, the harm families committed on the adopted children internally to conform to outer family ideals. I draw here on Ellen Gordon-Bouvier's theorization of relational vulnerability as a form of state-created and avoidable harm that materializes through families' attempts to uphold idealized images of themselves, while "masking the realities of the inherently vulnerable human condition within its folds."[11] Gordon-Bouvier's legal analysis

focuses on gendered vulnerabilities that result from women's unpaid care work in the UK today. The family–state–secrecy connection, inherent to her understanding of relational vulnerability, also usefully applies to historical and theoretical contexts in which states not only refuse to take responsibility for gendered, racial, or other vulnerabilities but also relegate those responsibilities to the private realm of families. Secrecy, understood as a practice of knowledge management around stigma or deviations from norms within families, is integral to how relational vulnerabilities materialize. As I will show, private, semi-secret adoptions of children born of war in 1950s' and early 1960s' Denmark could generate relational vulnerabilities, too.

The scholarly designation "children born of war" is an umbrella term that refers to children born to foreign soldiers and local women during conflicts or occupations. Documentation of lived experiences and official policies toward CBOW are rare or often difficult to access.[12] Post-war Denmark is an exception here, as children born to German soldiers as well as adoptees born to African American soldiers have created or co-created testimonies that document their respective experiences. Throughout this case study, I will place Regina's testimony from the *Børneimporten* in conversation with the experiences of Erik, a child already born in 1942 to a German soldier and a Danish woman, whom I interviewed in 2019.[13] Erik's mother was forced into accepting his adoption by relatives in 1952, reflecting a similar lack of state oversight that left it to families to manage any negative repercussions resulting from the child's CBOW background. CBOW tend to be associated with the foreign essence of their fathers and the perceived national treason of fraternizing mothers.[14] Denmark had seen approximately 10,000 children born to Danish women and German soldiers during the Nazi occupation of Denmark, only a decade prior to the "child import." Domestic adoptions were a common strategy of caring for these children while hiding their stigmatized paternity.[15] In my reading, the local histories of CBOW adoptions are an important part of how the vulnerabilities of the next generation of German African American CBOW adoptees materialized. Erik's enforced adoption points to a possible pattern of collusion between state and family secrecy in CBOW adoptions, to deflect state responsibility for "unwanted" children who did not fit into the ethno-national ideal of the family.

In the following, I first locate the specific stakes of CBOW within the theoretical frames of vulnerability studies. The analytical sections then focus on how Regina's and Erik's respective vulnerabilities relate to their status as CBOW adoptees and to their families' attempts to distance themselves from the lingering stigmatization of German parentage and fraternization. Their adoptive families meant to protect them, and themselves, through colorblindness and secrecy in ways that blurred the lines between racial and relational vulnerabilities. Regina's family's colorblindness did not just negate her racialized Otherness, but also the ethno-national stigma attached to

her Germanness. When Regina, a child born in Hanau in 1962 to an unidentified African American soldier and a destitute German mother, arrived as an adoptee in her new Danish family,[16] the national humiliation of fraternization was a fresh memory and "tyskertøs" a slur. Likewise, Erik's adoptive family's secrecy practices were not unlike colorblindness in that they were a conscious refusal to see or acknowledge his German heritage. Despite the differences in their racialization and immediate vulnerabilities, the echoes and similarities between Erik's and Regina's cases represent a compelling focal point for the theorization of CBOW vulnerabilities in Euro-American adoption histories.

Theories of CBOW Vulnerability

I approach the overlaps between Regina's and Erik's experiences as a case study to theorize the entanglements of racial and relational vulnerability in the adoption of children born of war. The historical context and the multiple forms of harm that CBOW may face offer new entry points into vulnerability studies. Vulnerability has emerged as a distinct theoretical concern in different fields since the 1980s, most notably in feminist philosophy and care ethics, social psychology as well as in critical legal studies. The timing was no coincidence. Neoliberalism had begun to latch onto the notion of resilience, an individual's ability to thrive despite being in a vulnerable situation. A neoliberal interpretation of resilience offered a convenient excuse for governments and other institutions to outsource their responsibility for the well-being of the individual while ignoring structural and ideological factors that produced the vulnerabilities in the first place.[17] The field of vulnerability studies evolved as a response to this development, positing that states and societies have a responsibility toward especially vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly.[18] Neither the conceptual nor the political definition of vulnerability, though, is straightforward. Even though well-intentioned, these initial conceptualizations of "extraordinary" vulnerability soon came under scrutiny for their paternalism and denial of agency to groups deemed vulnerable.[19] The very act of labeling people vulnerable may produce stereotypes of victimhood, but, without recognition of the forces behind dependency and exploitation, harm cannot be redressed either.[20]

The specific vulnerabilities of children born of war are situated within this unresolved tension around victimhood. CBOW in post-conflict societies face stigmatization that can lead to violence in extreme cases and wide-ranging forms of discrimination in everyday life.[21] Family secrecy is a common strategy to manage the stigma, as both families and states try to hide the associations to foreignness, fraternization, and transgression that the physical presence of these children may entail.[22] Social historians have focused on reclaiming agency and visibility for CBOW by documenting their individual resilience.[23] The children's personal traits, their families, and their

environment can all be factors that contribute to resilience, in ways that counter neoliberal interpretations of the concept.[24] However, the possibility for individual success in managing the stigma does not automatically resolve the broader societal pressure that has kept the experiences and historical circumstances surrounding the children's stigma hidden or marginalized for so long.

Rene Provost and Myriam Denov note, from a legal studies perspective, that visibility of CBOW victimhood is important for the success of court cases as well as for public recognition and access to human rights.[25] The prevalence of secrecy in CBOW families, as an individual strategy to protect both the child from immediate suffering and the family from shame, combined with legal neglect, may negate the child a victim status. In many cases, the rights and needs of children born of war then tend to go unaddressed.[26] Visible CBOW victimhood, though, is no simple solution, because "emphasizing the indirect victim-status of CBW may weaken the mothers' victimhood claims, as the harm suffered by CBW is often channeled through the mother in the form of abuse or neglect."[27] The articulation of the child's needs can worsen the mother's situation, since CBOW vulnerability is inherently intergenerational. Conditions that harm the children emerge from social and legal responses to their mothers' vulnerability, who also suffered. Laws in the broadest sense, as parameters that define what a society imagines to be relevant or even real, thus shape the possible terms of cultural and social recognition of CBOW's hidden or secondary vulnerabilities.[28] And the actions of families, not least through secrecy, shape how these terms evolve over time.

Since the early 2000s, the increasing number of published and public testimonies of Danish children born of war has opened a space for reckoning with the nation's hidden CBOW histories. Recognition of the adult CBOW's victimhood can legitimate the involved individuals' neglected vulnerabilities, but the belated memories also reflect the unresolved legacies of the past tensions between a mother's and the then child's vulnerabilities. Many Danish CBOW only started to address past harm late in life, often after their mothers had passed away to avoid potential re-traumatization and as an expression of respect for their suffering.[29] This respect, though, could also be an intimate form of reproduction of relational vulnerability through the accumulative effect of slow violence through family secrecy: if the child knew of and accepted the mother's secret, they also participated in upholding the very norms that caused the mother's stigma in the previous generation.[30] To understand the specific challenges of CBOW adoptees in post-war Denmark, family secrecy practices are, in this light, as important as legal interpretations of family norms, as both tie into Ellen Gordon-Bouvier's notion of relational vulnerability.

The present analysis is based on two adult CBOW adoptees' belated family mem-

ories. There are clear empirical limitations to a case study approach. The two personal testimonies can only point to the role of the state and open questions about the degrees of interconnection between Denmark's domestic and emerging transnational CBOW adoptions in the 1950s. However, a qualitative analysis of secrecy practices within family memories can offer valuable insights into experiences of vulnerability. Memories repeat, re-actualize, and also potentially change how narrative inheritances shape the sense of self of family members, and they may also carry the imprint of the legacies of family secrecy practices—traces of how secrecy has mediated between individual needs and broader social norms.[31] I follow Carol Smart here, who conceives of family secrecy as a practice of knowledge management that may facilitate protection from one kind of social vulnerability while creating conditions for other kinds to arise.[32] Secrets as well as revelations may sustain, build, or change relations within families but also toward different levels of society in that they "create and maintain identities, negotiate intersubjective life, regulate social interaction, and frame institutional practices."[33] Regina's and Erik's family memories in their testimonies are a source that documents the long-term impact of the vulnerabilities they experienced as children.

Racial Vulnerabilities

"Brown babies," the name for children born to African American soldiers and German women in the Anglophone world, became known as "mulatbarn," or mulatto children in Denmark.[34] US American racial ideologies and their hegemonic black/white reference frame certainly followed these children to Denmark, attached to their visible racial difference. Coming-of-age Regina faced severe racialized mobbing from her teachers and peers who beat her up, stole her belongings, and called her "black pig."[35] However, through its translation, the black/white binary blended into, and was changed by, the national Danish racial reference frames as well. Danish adoptive parents may have resorted to colorblindness toward their new family members, but society at large was quick to label these children, who stood out in schools and everywhere as being different, as mulatto children. This term points to Denmark's own colonial past in the Danish West Indies, or at least to the fact that the concept of a mulatto child to describe racial difference circulated in Denmark at the time.[36] Danes, though, used the mulatto concept not just to denote the children's Blackness but also to mark their partial Whiteness. As outlined above, the main association for the perceived "White part" in these biracial children in 1950s' Denmark would have been German Whiteness. Their Germanness connected the biracial CBOW adoptees to the previous generation of Danish German CBOW, coming of age at that time, who were a thorn in the nation's eye: they were White, but their existence represented the racialized/racializing legacies of Nazism's eugenic policies and the shame of their

mothers' perceived sexual and ethno-national treason.[37] Regina's racialization as a "tyskertøs" thus reflects how the reach of Jim Crow intersected with the ethno-national stigma of Germanness attached to Danish CBOW in post-WWII Denmark—a moment of continuity and change for racial vulnerabilities mediated through adoptions.

The Danish child import followed larger patterns of Euro-American adoption history. In Denmark, adoptions had long been a means of child welfare for orphans or illegitimate children as well as an addition of manual labor to adoptive families in the early twentieth century. After WWII, the numbers of domestic adoptees decreased, but expectations of the children fulfilling affective labor for adoptive parents became more important.[38] In the 1950s, domestic adoptions also started to give way to transnational adoptions, which, however, were only fully institutionalized by the 1970s.[39] In these two post-WWII decades, private initiatives and private-public partnerships were the main force behind the first transnational adoptions of war orphans or children born of war from Central Europe, Korea, Japan, and, eventually, Vietnam to the US and Scandinavia. The perceived right of parents to form nuclear families tended to take precedent over the children's interests and parents thereby shaped these emerging transnational processes before they were institutionalized.[40] At the same time, prospective parents also explicitly framed transnational adoptees as vulnerable subjects in need of humanitarian intervention and ignored the fact that many of these children would be racialized within a Scandinavian context.[41] As Barbara Yngvesson highlighted, "Transracial adoption (whether domestic or transnational) makes visible the exclusions on which complete families (and complete nations) are premised."[42]

Vilna Bashi Treitler, from a US American perspective on adoption history, conceives of adoption even as an index of racial vulnerability. The reasons as to why families give up children for adoption as well as the motivations of US families to adopt are, in his view, deeply racialized and racializing, even if these processes tend to be covered up by colorblindness.[43] Colorblindness, "a professed inability to see racial difference,"[44] also shaped the transnational/transracial adoptions of the Danish "child import." Danish media, parents, and adoption activists alike viewed the transnational adoptions as an inherently humanitarian act of saving vulnerable children. Embedded in the humanitarian narrative, media also clamored for the right of parents to form families and dwindling domestic adoptions meant prospective parents *should* be able to adopt from abroad. Kim Park Nelson and Lene Myong capture this national mood of the operation as being about "a need for children/children in need" and identify colorblindness as a key feature in how Danish coverage presented the children.[45] From this perspective, the child import represents a local point of departure: a parent-led movement that would shape future regulations of transnational adoptions

in Denmark in its practices, but which also enshrined colorblindness in adoptions as an operating principle on this side of the Atlantic. To this day, adoptees still face the expectation to adapt to Scandinavian norms of Whiteness, even though many of them have become more outspoken and critical about colorblindness since the 1990s.[46]

The Danish child import, though, does not just index the future racial vulnerability of the children within and through colorblindness. It also points to past root causes of their racial vulnerabilities, the reasons why the CBOW were given up/collected for adoption, due to the entanglements and proximities between miscegenation and fraternization. Regina's and Erik's immediate vulnerability in their birth families is directly tied to the situation of their mothers and a response to their fraternization as an act of sexual and ethno-national transgression. We have no direct access to their mothers' stories. Their fate was, however, an important part of Regina's and Erik's respective recovery of hidden family history and informs both their own memories as well as their interpretations of the circumstances surrounding their births. Looking back as adults, they express understanding for their biological mothers' precarious situations, even though they both suffered the consequences.

Regina's mother Elfriede worked at the US military base in Hanau in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, she had multiple relationships with US service men. Looking back, Regina thinks her mother hoped that one of them would marry her, to lift her out of poverty. Marriage never happened, though, and her relationships resulted in eleven children from different US soldiers. Elfriede put all of them up for adoption, at times also at the direct intervention of German authorities who took malnourished children from her. While some of her children remained in Germany, most of them ended up with adoptive families in Denmark. When Regina was nine months old, a Danish woman named Inger Lise came to pick her up at a German orphanage.[47]

Erik's mother, on the other hand, had an affair with a German marine soldier during WWII and became pregnant. The soldier still recognized his paternity but was soon drafted again and ended up dying during a battle at sea in the English Channel in 1944. As a single mother with an illegitimate German Danish child, Erik's mother was in a highly vulnerable situation at the end of the German occupation. As Erik learned much later in life, her extended family wanted to ensure that his German paternity remained a secret to anyone outside the family and to himself. This secret protected the family's status but forced his mother to abandon her relationship to Erik. When Erik's mother married a Danish man after the war, her new husband did not want the "German child" in his family. His mother therefore placed him in the care of Erik's grandmother's sister's family. She continued to see him occasionally, but Erik never returned to her, even though her marriage fell apart quickly.[48]

Regina's and Erik's respective loss of their birth parents reflects the similarities in how the involved states and families responded to children born out of unions characterized as miscegenation and/or fraternization. Elfriede suffered from the stigma attached to interracial sex, to illegitimacy, and to poverty in post-war Germany. While Erik's mother had not had interracial sex, she faced not only illegitimacy and poverty but also the stigma of a specific, ethno-national sexual transgression through her fraternization with a German soldier during the occupation. It is important to note the differences between miscegenation and fraternization here. Miscegenation emerges out of a distinctly US American racial history of chattel slavery and cannot be equated with fraternization. Local New York politicians invented the scientific-sounding term in a parody pamphlet during the 1864 US presidential elections to denote the "unnaturalness" of interracial sex.[49] The new concept caught on quickly, shaping legal practices in local courts until the US Supreme Court officially recognized interracial sex as a felony in 1880.[50] This new legal framework was a pillar of White supremacy in the post-Civil War era and remained in place until the Supreme Court ruling of *Loving vs Virginia* in 1967. Fraternization, on the other hand, is a less specifically confined historical phenomenon. Wars and occupations have always led to forms of sexual contact, where the lines between coercion and consent are often difficult to draw. The legal, social, and political impacts of fraternization shift with the context of the given conflict, but women, and their eventual children, were commonly stigmatized for sexual contact with foreign enemy soldiers.[51] Despite these distinct contexts, state responses to both fraternization and miscegenation may function as processes of racialization, in that they police sexual and racial/ethno-national boundaries in intimate relations.

During the Allied invasion of Germany and the ensuing post-war occupation, miscegenation and fraternization blended into one another. The US army only allowed a "proportional" number of Black soldiers in segregated units and applied miscegenation policies within its reach. In their off-duty time in Europe and Japan African American soldiers could fraternize with local women.[52] However, the existence of miscegenation laws at the time meant that "deviant" sexual relations still limited their access to civil rights.[53] The reach of these laws, for example, barred biracial CBOW in occupied Germany from US citizenship.[54] Acts of fraternization during WWII were clearly distinct from miscegenation at large, but in Denmark they were also racialized—albeit in the ethno-nationalist, eugenic terms of Nazi Germany. Nazism regarded children born to German soldiers and Dutch, Danish, or Norwegian women as racially "valuable" and supported these children and their mothers' relations during the occupation period.[55] The Danish public framed the fraternizing women either as prostitutes, rape victims, or Nazi collaborators, while, as Anette Warring's research has revealed, the vast majority of the "German girls" had romantic relations with soldiers.[56]

The voluntary nature of these sexual relations increased the perceived injury to Danish ethno-national honor, and it also moved the social impact of Danish WWII fraternization closer to US miscegenation policies. The post-war backlash against fraternizing women was fierce across formerly German-occupied nations, with women being shorn in public, dragged through streets, and shunned at workplaces or in homes.[57] The backlash also affected children born to such unions. Families thus tried to hide any visible traces of German paternity. Mothers often moved to different towns, left children with their Danish grandparents, or married Danish husbands who would accept the children as their own.[58] However, if a CBOW's German paternity was outed in schools or elsewhere, they, too, suffered severe harassment as a "Nazi child."[59] For the "mulatto children" in Denmark, the stigma attached to fraternization and miscegenation intersected directly in Regina's racial vulnerability. Her visible Blackness at the time also denoted her Germanness and her mothers' fraternization. When Regina's math teacher used the slur of her being a "tyskertøs," he framed her as a projection screen for her mother's sexual transgression. Elfriede's relation with an Allied soldier played out in a different racial context than the fraternization of Danish women with German soldiers. Her teacher nevertheless applied the inherited stigma of her mother's fraternization transnationally, transracially, and across these distinct generations of children born of war.

Despite the differences between family secrecy and colorblindness, both are practices of knowledge management regarding perceived stigma within families, meant to protect the children *and* to mitigate the impact of their children's deviation from a norm on themselves. Erik did not face racial vulnerability, narrowly conceived, due to a visible difference. Erik's adoptive family could resort to secrecy around his German paternity, which enabled him to pass as "just" Danish. Even Erik himself had no idea that his father had been a German soldier until after the death of his adoptive parents in the late 1970s. There were moments of near-revelation for Erik coming-of-age, when, for example, a teacher used his German name Heinrich at a roll call. However, since his adoptive parents had a high status in the local community, the teacher chose to protect the secret and quickly said to the class that they all knew Heinrich as Erik and moved on. Regina, on the other hand, not only experienced explicit racism but also suffered from her family's colorblindness, the non-recognition of her discriminatory experiences in and outside the home. Their respective family's management of the stigma attached to fraternization and the children's ethno-national deviation as a *German* CBOW connects Regina's and Erik's experience in a grey zone between racial and relational vulnerability that affected them both. Going beyond a racial vulnerability tied to the visibility of an ethno-racial difference, I thus explore in the next section how practices of colorblindness and family secrecy, as knowledge management between families and society at large, co-created conditions for rela-

tional vulnerabilities for the CBOW, their birth mothers, and adoptive families in both contexts.

Relational Vulnerability

Secrecy and vulnerability are closely related. *Børneimporten* records biracial adoptees' individual, embodied vulnerabilities, but it also analyzes Botfelt's administrative practices that enabled her to facilitate the child import as an open secret that state officials chose to ignore. The Danish justice ministry consistently neglected to curb Botfelt's activities, while various lower administrative branches collaborated on legalizing the imported children as adoptees after the fact.[60] If a placement failed, Botfelt tried to take care of the issue internally with the help of other parents.[61] Mutual secrecy thus enabled parents to proceed with their desired adoptions, while the state avoided official responsibility for the children's well-being. The domestic placements of German CBOW just a decade prior reflected similar patterns. After her divorce, Erik's mother moved to Copenhagen, while he remained with his foster parents in a small Danish town on the countryside. By 1952, when Erik had just turned 10, his foster parents wanted to officially adopt him. He remembered signing some papers himself during the process, but he only learned after the death of his adoptive parents in 1978 that they had forced his biological mother to give up custody. His older brother later told him that his adoptive father travelled with local police to Copenhagen and threatened his mother to "sign this, or he would tell her connections in Copenhagen that she had had a child with a German."[62] After this, his mother ceased all contact to him, and Erik only saw her again as an adult.

Secrecy in adoptions can revolve around the protection of mothers or the question as to whether or not the children themselves should know they are adoptees.[63] The cases of Regina and Erik show how a state might tacitly support family secrecy in and around adoptions of children born of war for other reasons, for example, to resolve a situation where children are desired for adoption but do not fit into an imagined ethno-national family ideal. The Danish state may not have had a set of norms or policies ready to understand and regulate transnational/transracial adoptions in the 1950s, but it had just collected extensive experience in how to hide German paternity of children born during the WWII occupation of Denmark—also through privately initiated and locally arranged adoptions, as in Erik's case. This experience might be part of the reason as to why it took the Danish justice ministry more than seven years to even acknowledge and then regulate the transnational adoptions of biracial German foster children. It is unlikely that the Danish state, designated internationally as a racially liberal utopia, would have openly objected to the presence of differently racialized children. The justice ministry thus may have simply expected adopting families to manage any consequences a perceived deviation from the Danish eth-

no-national family ideal may have caused on their own—just as families with German CBOW had done.

Following this hypothesis, I read the absence of state oversight in both the domestic adoptions of German CBOW and in the transnational adoptions of CBOW from Germany to Denmark as a way for the state to avoid responsibility. More research, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is necessary to establish empirically whether the similarities in these two approaches were a conscious choice, but the documented impact of interrelated state and family secrecy practices on Regina's and Erik's cases shows that these practices produced a distinct kind of relational vulnerability in both contexts. The first thing to note is that the state was not entirely absent. As Gordon-Bouvier argues, the "state is never truly *absent*, no matter how minimally it protects its subjects."[64] The neglect to regulate the child import is also an active choice of deciding which children not to protect. And in Regina's as well as Erik's adoption cases, the families needed local authorities to finalize adoption proceedings. Erik's adoptive father even enforced his adoption with the help of a local police officer, in an apparently agreed understanding that this was in the best interest of the child, the family, and presumably the broader national interest. And yet, by keeping it local, the cooperation with authorities could unfold without official recognition and responsibility. Family laws and child welfare provisions, like adoption procedures, may strive to be impartial and humanitarian in official terms, but Gordon-Bouvier stresses they are always also interpreted through or against normative family ideals in practice.[65] Local interpretations and enforcements of family law could also help erase the visibility of German paternity, as Erik's adoption case exemplifies.

Relational vulnerability, as a theoretical lens, further calls attention to the ambivalent role of the mothers in these CBOW adoptions, the ways their biological *and* adoptive mothers could experience and pass on vulnerabilities to the children by protecting themselves or their interests. Despite their different situations, neither Erik's nor Regina's biological mother had much choice but to agree to the adoption. Without sufficient financial means or protection against the backlash due to their fraternization, they could not afford to keep their children even if they had wanted to. And while Erik's adoptive parents' high social status appears to have insulated them from any repercussions from the semi-legal adoptions, Inger Lise (Regina's adoptive mother) had no such privileges. The Danish couples seeking to adopt biracial CBOW wanted, above all, to achieve a nuclear family. If the child placement did not work out for any reason or the marriage broke apart, mothers faced their own relational vulnerabilities formerly hidden through the institution of marriage. In her recollections, Regina characterizes her first years in Denmark as the happiest of her life. When she was seven years old, her adoptive parents divorced. She experienced the divorce as a key event for her personal vulnerability. Regina moved with Inger Lise to a differ-

ent town, even though she had a much closer relationship to her adoptive father Flemming, while her older siblings stayed with their father to finish their schooling.[66] Although the adult Regina acknowledges that her mother suffered from depression and vulnerability after the divorce, the new situation left her exposed to her adoptive mother's struggles. Inger Lise started a daycare institution to maintain herself, and from age seven onward Regina was expected to help with everything, from changing diapers to cleaning up. Regina notes, in hindsight, she felt like "a little slave."[67] She describes the relationship to her mother as not feeling like a loved daughter but fulfilling a service function instead. Inger Lise's divorce exposed her gendered relational vulnerability, but its consequences doubled down on Regina's personal racial vulnerability.

Regina's and Erik's memories invite us to conceive of relational vulnerability more broadly, as an intergenerational mediation of harm through practices of family secrecy revolving around their racially or ethno-nationally undesired paternity. Gordon-Bouvier's theoretical focus on the harm that mothers inflict upon themselves, by hiding vulnerabilities to fulfill national family ideals, does not fully address the ways in which these expectations and a state's lack of intervention can ripple further within families and across generations. Family secrecy is a highly ambivalent practice of knowledge management that can both protect and harm vulnerable members of the family, either simultaneously or at different moments in time.[68] For example, family secrecy protected Erik as well as his adoptive family's reputation in the short run. However, it nevertheless caused long-term harm through what Ashley Barnwell describes as the slow violence of family secrecy. Barnwell uses the concept of slow violence to highlight how unseen harm can accumulate in families through certain kinds of secrecy over time, for example, if family secrecy cuts off family members from each other, if it burdens future generations with discriminatory legacies from the past, or if it makes families complicit in reproducing the harmful norms the family sought to evade through the secret-keeping itself.[69] By paying attention to these forms of slow violence through family secrecy practices, we can also trace the transfer of the mothers' relational vulnerability to their children.

Erik's and Regina's racial vulnerabilities differ, but, as adopted CBOW in Denmark, they inherited the impact of their mothers' relational vulnerabilities in similar ways. The adoptions themselves cut off the family line between the birth mothers and Regina and Erik for decades. Their biological fathers were already twice removed, mostly present in the inherited stigma that still shaped the children's lives. Regina has never met her African American father. And since Erik only learned late in life about his German father, he was no longer able to meet his German grandmother, who had already passed. His experience with Danish state archives further indicates

that the expectation that German CBOW paternities stay hidden as a family matter persisted well into the 1990s. Erik then searched for more information on his German father in the national archives, but he experienced what he perceived as intentionally misleading information from staff. An employee told Erik over the phone that there was no paternity record for him available—even though, as he knows today through the archive's logs, that information was present and had been viewed by staff that very day. The official appears to have been unwilling to disclose information on a German Danish paternity case. Even though this is just one case, it shows that national interests in decreasing or hiding the visibility of CBOW histories had not yet entirely disappeared.

Finally, children who inherit relational vulnerability through the slow violence of family secrecy can break its further transmission, at least to future generations, by acknowledging, as adults, the hidden family lines and their own former suffering. For example, Regina proudly highlights her personal resilience and that, with the support of her art teacher and occasional visits to her father, she managed to make it through to adulthood. And even though she never revealed the extent of her personal struggles to anyone else until late in life, she managed to find and meet Elfriede in 1999, through the initiative of some of her other adopted siblings. Regina expressed relief and satisfaction that she finally better understood her roots after the meeting.[70] Erik became an active member of the Danish war children association, which managed to secure the right of CBOW to see their own paternity case files in the Danish archives and through which he has recovered much of his formerly hidden family history.

Conclusion

Children born of war, in the past as well as today, face multiple, interconnected vulnerabilities that materialize beyond binary perceptions of victimhood, protection, and harm. By analyzing the similarities and differences in the vulnerabilities of two adopted Danish CBOW from different, yet related generations—Regina, the child of an Allied African American soldier and a German woman, as well as Erik, born to a German soldier and a Danish woman—this case study has contributed a novel historical and theoretical perspective to Euro-American adoption history. The connections of racial and relational vulnerability between the two CBOW adoptees highlight that the Danish child import was not just a point of departure for a future colorblind transnational adoption movement, but also a point of continuity and transfer within Danish and US American adoption practices. Or, to put it differently: without Jim Crow, without the presence of African American soldiers in occupied Germany, and without the refusal of the US army command to recognize these children as US citizens, they would not have been available for adoption in the first place. Instead, the subsequent

fate of these children was decided in Denmark. Regina's experiences show that the legacies of Nazi German, eugenic racial ideologies, the entangled stigma of miscegenation and fraternization, as well as the local historical precedent of the domestic adoptions of German WWII CBOW to hide their paternity, as in Erik's case, shaped her racial vulnerability as a German "mulatto" adoptee in Denmark.

These historical perspectives in themselves then offer a conceptual entry into theorizing vulnerability in a context that precedes the predominance of neoliberalism. The current theoretical debates in vulnerability studies often wrestle with the question of how to best counter the neoliberal privatization of harm.[71] However, the post-WWII experiences of adopted children born of war in Denmark remind us of the impact and possible continuities of older forms of state out-sourcing of responsibility for the vulnerable through the social institution of the family. Relational vulnerability theorizes how families may hide internal vulnerabilities to comply with larger societal norms or state expectations. The present case studies exemplify this approach and add a thus far undertheorized, intergenerational perspective to the concept of relational vulnerability, in that the slow violence of certain family secrecy practices may pass on hidden harm to next generations. Family secrecy, as an ambivalent practice of knowledge management, enabled families to live with their adopted children's perceived deviation from ethno-national norms, but at the cost of creating other forms of relational vulnerability that would affect their children for decades to come. The experiences of adopted children born of war are just one of many contexts where uneven access to power and dependency in intimate relations blurs the line between protection and harm. The Danish post-WWII approach to CBOW adoptions is nevertheless a pertinent case to call for more attention to the ambivalent role of families in mitigating and reproducing vulnerabilities for children whom governments refuse to support or even recognize.

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Notes

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36 The Danish public at large called the biracial CBOW "mulatto children," a reference that might hark back to Denmark's own colonial past in the Caribbean. While not widely discussed, there are some records about the existence of "mulatto children" in the Danish West Indies. The Danish colonies had no anti-miscegenation laws as such in the books, but there was a strong social norm against interracial sex—especially for Danish women. White men could maintain relations to local women if they were discrete enough, but if a Danish woman fell pregnant in doing so, she could be stripped of her property and exiled. See Marianne Rostgaard and Lotte Schou, *Kulturmøder i dansk kolonihistorie* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2010), 94.

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African American Literature, Racial Vulnerability, and the Anthropocene

Reading W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in the Twenty-First Century

Matthias Klestil

Abstract

This article discusses W. E. B. Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), in the context of the broader debate on the role of race in the Anthropocene and in relation to Judith Butler's theory on corporeal vulnerability. Specifically, this article spotlights three particular ways in which rereading African American literature may enhance a more race-conscious Anthropocene discourse. Initially, this article demonstrates how Du Bois's text gives opportunity to trace African American vulnerabilities through various scales from the local to the planetary. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerability, I argue, can be vital for better understanding and acting against continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene. This article continues by turning to Du Bois's representation of vulnerabilities as part of power relations, showing how African American epistemologies of resistance negotiate racial vulnerability. Lastly, this article examines how the novel plays with generic conventions to engage racial vulnerabilities, evincing an African American aesthetics of resistance and suggesting alternative forms of storytelling.

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African American Literature, Racial Vulnerability, and the Anthropocene

Reading W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* in the Twenty-First Century

Matthias Klestil

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell took up W. E. B. Du Bois's famous prediction about the "color line" to rephrase that a still more pressing issue of the twenty-first century "may prove to be whether planetary life will remain viable for most of the earth's inhabitants."[1] Buell's claim was nearly visionary, as, today, an even greater amount of scientific evidence and an alarming increase in tangible effects of a changing climate around the globe leave little doubt that anthropogenic climate change will indeed shape our near and far-off future. Moreover, Buell's allusion to Du Bois was farsighted for hinting at links between race and the environment, which have become central to various branches of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities.

At the same time, however, and in light of the mushrooming discourse of the Anthropocene, which until recently has paid little attention to questions of race, Buell's parallelism also somewhat obfuscates the fact that Du Bois's work has much to say about "planetary life." His texts often not only move imaginatively through local, sectional, national, and global contexts but they also stress their entanglements, revealing interactions between humans and the nonhuman natural world. More than turning Du Bois into an environmental writer,[2] this tendency to expose racialization as shaping relations to nonhuman nature on various scales makes his work particularly relevant for exploring links between race and the Anthropocene. Du Bois and African American literature often address intersections between the problem of the "color line" (Du Bois) and the problem of the viability of "planetary life"

(Buell). Hence, though not sufficiently noted thus far,[3] such literature has much to say about the Anthropocene, as it records how changing constructions of race, concepts of the (non-)human, and racially inflected power relations, vulnerabilities, and resistance strategies contributed to the shaping of modernity. The African American literary tradition offers alternative analytical lenses and forms of storytelling that can be vital for critically addressing still largely underrepresented questions of race in the Anthropocene.

Following Rob Nixon in his assessment that many conceptualizations of the proposed new geological epoch have "marginalized questions of unequal human agency, unequal human impacts, and unequal human vulnerabilities,"[4] this essay turns to Du Bois's debut novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), to suggest ways in which African American literature speaks to the Anthropocene. As such, I focus on questions of vulnerability through concepts from African American studies and Judith Butler's notion of vulnerability as being tied to resistance. Butler's thought in particular provides a productive framework when turning to what I consider "racial vulnerability," understood here as such forms of vulnerability that, while rooted in an ontological human condition, are at the same time significantly shaped through social constructions, practices, and performances of race. Therefore, racial vulnerability is not to be equated with the vulnerability of African Americans, although in a US context the group thus designated has disproportionately experienced specific forms of racial vulnerability. Racial vulnerability, however, is most productive conceptually and as an analytical tool if understood more abstractly, as emerging and traceable through particular discursive contexts, racially inflected categories, bodies, and systemic distributive patterns. Even with my main objective being to (provide means to) explore how African American writing bears on the Anthropocene, through an ecocritical reading of Du Bois's novel, the following thereby also seeks to chart some of the general potentials of interlinking scholarship on vulnerability more extensively with Anthropocene thought.

To this end, after briefly contextualizing my argument within the broader debate on race in the Anthropocene, concepts from African American studies, and Butler's theory on vulnerability, I discuss *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* by spotlighting three ways in which rereading African American literature in the twenty-first century may enhance a more race-conscious Anthropocene discourse. I demonstrate how the novel gives opportunity to trace the workings and entanglements of African American racial vulnerabilities through various scales from the local to the planetary. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerabilities can be vital for a better understanding of, and acting against, continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene. My argument continues by turning to Du Bois's representation of vulnerabilities as part of power relations, showing how African American epistemologies of resistance

negotiate racial vulnerability. Lastly, I briefly examine how the novel plays with generic conventions to engage (racial) vulnerabilities, evincing an African American aesthetics of resistance and suggesting alternative forms of storytelling.

Race, Vulnerability, Anthropocene

Both race and vulnerability are central to the concept of the Anthropocene. The latter is vital to the new geological epoch in at least two fundamental ways. On the one hand, the Anthropocene formalizes an ontological human vulnerability through the notion of a (self-destructive) species agency, the idea that "humanity acts on the planet as a geophysical force."[5] On the other hand, it is precisely this ontological human vulnerability of the Anthropocene that threatens to inhibit our view of unequally distributed vulnerabilities emerging through human history and extending into the present, for example, along race, class, or gender lines. Race and racialization are thus among the significant factors for the new geological epoch, as a growing debate on the Anthropocene and race, especially in the fields of (human) geography and (moral) philosophy, emphasizes. Noting an erasure of race in Anthropocene discourse, scholars such as Laura Pulido, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Kathryn Yusoff, and Nancy Tuana have recently come to address the need and provide models for exploring its role in the Anthropocene more rigorously.[6] Their research complements other critiques of the Anthropocene that revolt against the perception that the new epoch, through a "flattening we" of the human species, has inappropriately resurrected "a figure who reigns as a singular (masculine) 'species,'" thereby ensuring awareness that the Anthropocene also needs to be seen as a racial process.[7]

My reading of Du Bois's novel focuses specifically on the text's negotiation of racial vulnerability in relation to the Anthropocene—i.e., on such forms of vulnerability that, while rooted in an ontological human condition, are at the same time significantly shaped through social constructions, practices, and performances of race. Thus, yet another set of relations becomes central to my argument, namely the manifold interlinkages between race and vulnerability, which have become an object of study in a variety of fields and contexts over the past few decades. While links between race and vulnerability have been addressed in (some of the) research that explicitly focuses on vulnerability, some of the most relevant contributions in this respect stem from other fields, such as US ethnic studies or the field of primary interest in the present context, African American studies. Though not explicitly under the rubric of vulnerability studies, the latter, often through revisions of entire disciplines such as anthropology or geography and their racist pasts, has frequently produced concepts that centrally involve questions of vulnerability, as African American studies scholars have turned to the various "afterlives of slavery."[8] Demonstrating how productive vulnerability as a concept may be, a host of major studies in the field have

dealt with forms of racial vulnerability in diverse contexts ranging from the Middle Passage and gender roles during Jim Crow, to surveillance, imprisonment, and the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] Such scholarship is broadly reflective of how "in the United States, our economy, our cultural frameworks and repertoires, and our government policies have been shaped by a history of racial relations and racially inflected decision making," thus forming an immediate context for my ecocritical readings.[10]

Beyond drawing from such theory, I want to take a step back to sketch briefly and more generally how African American literature may speak to Anthropocene discourse via notions of vulnerability. Butler's ideas about corporeal vulnerability offer a productive framework in this respect, as they help highlight how linking racial vulnerability and the Anthropocene may enrich a rereading of the African American literary tradition and can therefore be particularly fruitful for three reasons.

Firstly, I read Butler's deconstructivist focus on the human as being intimately related to African American literary and critical discourse, which, as Cornel West once succinctly pointed out, always "was meant to try to redefine what it means to be human."[11] While traditional views often diagnosed a tendency to move "into" humanity out of a position of the systematically de-humanized, recent studies such as those by Lindgren Johnson, Yusoff, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson are questioning this assessment, arguing against interpretations of African American and Black diasporic literature as reacting to racialization through a mere "plea for human recognition."[12] Instead, they propose that African American resistance strategies, while engaging dehumanizing racialization, often rejected rather than embraced liberal humanism's assumptions.[13] Such views correspond with Butler's notion of vulnerability, which likewise rejects a "foundational, transcendentally understood human subject,"[14] and which is particularly productive in the present context, as it provides a concrete tool for examining US racial thought in relation to vulnerability: what Butler terms "name-calling." Taking into account practices of "name-calling," understood as being "vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose,"[15] speaks to African American literature, which has negotiated such practices for centuries. Butler's theory thus helps describe how systemic, changing forms of "name-calling" shaped not only racial vulnerabilities but also resistance strategies.

Secondly, Butler's thinking on vulnerability is productive in an African American context because it employs a lens that not only seeks "to show that vulnerability is part of resistance" but one that also explicitly refuses to view vulnerability as being primarily "victimization and passivity"—i.e., the opposite of autonomy, agency, and resistance.[16] Vulnerability in this sense, while being "an existential condition," is simultaneously also "a socially induced condition."[17] It is part of political and cultural practices, since it "always operates within a tactical field,"[18] and is therefore enmeshed in

relations of power, which by extension (as Michel Foucault so adamantly stressed) always hold the potential of resistance. Such an understanding of the concept enriches the reading of vulnerability in African American literature not only because it opens up new ways through which relations of racial vulnerability in this literary discourse can be disentangled, but also because this discourse itself often explicitly lays out and practices vulnerability as a productive rather than repressive concept. The African American literary tradition, after all, frequently exhibits a tendency to not victimize the vulnerable (whether humans or non-humans), to not categorically disconnect or eradicate forms of autonomy and agency from their plight. Instead, diverse texts, ranging from classic fugitive slave narratives to Du Bois's novels and into the present, abundantly show forms of vulnerability as conditions rather than opposites of enacting resistance—a thought that is also central to recent scholarship in African American studies, which celebrates resistance down to the level of what Hartman calls "the radical practice of everyday life."[19] Thus, Butler's proposal that vulnerability is intimately linked to resistance resonates strongly in this body of literature, making her standpoint an expedient tool to highlight what is often at the core of African American literature: racial vulnerability.

Thirdly, it is vital in the present context that Butler's approach refrains from privileging either ontological or discursive facets of vulnerability. Insofar as she focuses on the body, vulnerability always has an ontological dimension, as clarified in her assertion that "without shelter, we are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease, perhaps also to assault, hunger, and violence."[20] Yet, Butler at the same time stresses that any concrete form of vulnerability cannot emerge without also being constructed, since "the body is constitutively social and interdependent."[21] The primary way in which Butler's understanding of vulnerability thereby intersects with the Anthropocene is that it corresponds with one of the fundamental conceptual dichotomies that Anthropocene scholarship has offered thus far: what postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty terms the distinction between *homo* and *anthropos*. Chakrabarty reads the Anthropocene as a collision between different conceptions of the human, which corresponds with a new understanding of history that witnesses "the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history."[22] In his "pragmatic distinction" between *homo* (the human as cultural and social being) and *anthropos* (the human as biological creature and species among others), the human emerges "simultaneously on contradictory registers: as geophysical force and as political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions; subject to both the stochastic forces of nature (being itself one such force collectively) and open to the contingency of individual human experience; belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies."[24]

This doubled figure of the human Chakrabarty describes corresponds somewhat to Butler's notion of corporeal vulnerability having ontological and discursive dimensions, yet the two theories are nonetheless significantly incongruent. Butler's theory becomes particularly useful in an Anthropocene context, I believe, because it does not explicitly address the former, ontological dimension, via "upscaling." Butler does not base her twofold concept of vulnerability primarily along a trajectory of grand spatial and temporal scales in the way the Anthropocene does, yet nevertheless shares with Chakrabarty a mode of speaking "simultaneously on contradictory registers." This *only partial* overlapping, the way in which Butlerian theory is sufficiently vague regarding scales but immensely concrete regarding corporeality, is crucial. By understanding the body as "less an entity than a relation" that "cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living,"[25] Butlerian vulnerability includes *homo* and *anthropos*, yet refrains from aligning them with those Anthropocene scales regarded by many as barely accessible through human experience, imagination, or narrative. Vulnerability may thus become a means of interlinking and articulating Anthropocene forms of experience, with the process of translation between Butler's and Chakrabarty's ideas being key, as it marks an analytical potential of vulnerability in relation to the Anthropocene through a partial incongruence along the simultaneity of the ontological and the discursive. Vulnerability, in this sense, provides a powerful language for describing versions of human existence in the Anthropocene, a means of addressing transitions between scales of being in the Anthropocene without "upscaling."

Since tracing such transitions means telling "the story of human empires—of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions—in tandem with the larger story of how …*Homo sapiens* came to dominate. . . this planet,"[26] exploring perspectives such as that of the African American literary tradition is essential. What is central to this particular tradition—histories of enslavement, Jim Crow, ongoing (if more hidden forms of) racism—is also integral to the structures and practices that produced the Anthropocene. Reading African American perspectives via a (Butlerian) lens that focuses on racial vulnerability through the category of the human, forms of resistance, and vulnerability as being simultaneously ontological and discursive can serve to highlight alternative genealogies, epistemologies, and aesthetics of race in the Anthropocene. Thus, the following turns to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* to spotlight a threefold potential of African American literature in the twenty-first century, as it speaks to the Anthropocene through genealogies of racial vulnerability, thereby suggesting epistemologies and aesthetics of resistance.

Genealogies of African American Racial Vulnerability

A first potential of the African American literary tradition, with respect to exploring race in the Anthropocene, concerns how it chronicles various forms of racialized structures, practices, and vulnerabilities as a factor in humankind's rise as a geophysical power. What Pulido observes in a contemporary global context, namely that "the distribution of risk, vulnerability, and death (still) follows along pre-existing lines of racial inequality,"[27] also holds true for the US in particular. A racism of indifference, "a certain privilege to be able to overlook race" runs through Anthropocene discourse, showing "how quickly we seem to forget all the work that has been done to establish how and why so many people have been designated as nonhuman and bought and sold as material objects."[28] Rereading African American literature works against this forgetfulness, since the tradition often traces those "pre-existing lines of racial inequality" that Pulido and many others demand taking into account more thoroughly. A genealogy of African American racial vulnerability that charts "how and why so many people have been designated as nonhuman" is vital for understanding and acting against continuing forms of racism in the Anthropocene.[29]

The Quest of the Silver Fleece contributes to such a genealogy in elaborate ways, being partly a realist critique of the cotton industry and sharecropping and partly a sentimental romance revolving around its Black protagonists—Zora, a local descendant of slaves who grows up in an Alabamian swamp, and Bles, who arrives in the area to attend the local school. Critics have usually read the text as fictionalization of themes that Du Bois had introduced in earlier works. The novel, for example, echoes sociological studies such as *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), essays such as "The Study of the Negro Problems" (1898) and "The Talented Tenth" (1903), and the groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Its sentimentalism has earned the text negative assessments from some scholars and reviewers, while others have viewed Du Bois's cotton novel more positively as a fictionalized sociological tract that examines the role of the Black elite, peonage, and education philosophies around the turn of the century, lavishly mixing genres of romance and realism. Though its reception history, the fact that *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* defies neat categorization in African American literary history, and the minor status of fiction in Du Bois's oeuvre may explain the text's relative neglect in scholarship, it is nonetheless surprising that the novel has not received more ecocritical attention to date.[30]

For a genealogy of African American racial vulnerability in the Anthropocene, Du Bois's crowded text presents a rich archive that records how racialization and racism manifested in political, economic, and cultural practices in the early twentieth-century United States. The novel, for example, employs (stereotyped) characters to represent pseudo-scientific forms of racism ("sociologist" Mr. Bocombe), patronizingly

racist philanthropy (Northern schoolteacher Mary Taylor), Northern capitalism (her brother John), and the Old South (Colonel Cresswell). Thus, Du Bois demonstrates the working of schemes that seek to align the commercial interests of Wall Street, federal politics, and sectional sentiments, aiming, for example, to prevent alliances between social groups such as formerly enslaved African Americans and poor whites, to ensure the ongoing exploitation of both.

The novel's particular significance in an Anthropocene context, however, lies in Du Bois's sophisticated fusing of a portrayal of post-Reconstruction Southern peonage and its local distribution of (racial) vulnerabilities with a representation of interconnected global structures and practices. On the one hand, the text, set primarily in Alabama's Black Belt, deploys an elaborate panoramic technique to depict racially inflected forms of vulnerability by giving detailed accounts of the atrocious sharecropping system. A chapter titled "The Promise," set on land largely owned by the novel's representatives of the Old South, the Cresswell family, who barely tolerate and constantly sabotage the local Tooms School, an education project for descendants of the formerly enslaved run by New Englander Sarah Smith, exemplifies this technique. The omniscient narrative voice, focalized through the school's headmistress who nods off in her office, moves on:

> As she slept an old woman came toiling up the hill northward from the school, and out of the eastward spur of the Cresswell barony . . . Her face was dull and heave and homely, her old eyes sorrowful . . . Opposite her, to the southward, but too far for sight, an old man came out of the lower Cresswell place, skirting the swamp. He was tall, black, and gaunt, part bald with tufted hair, and a cowed and furtive look was in his eyes. One leg was crippled, and he hobbled painfully . . . A woman, hurrying out of the westward swamp up the path that led from Elspeth's, saw him [the young plantation owner] and shrank back hastily. She turned quickly into the swamp and waited, looking toward the school.[31]

Readers will recognize the (minor) characters thus described, all of whom the novel has already briefly mentioned by then; they will have a vague idea about Aunt Rachel (the "old woman"), Jim Sykes (the "old man"), and Bertie (the woman who "shrank back"). Yet, the manner in which Du Bois anonymizes these characters in the scene via a panoramic perspective, embedding them in the localities through which they move, only to refocus on each separately as the chapter continues and they enter Sarah Smith's office one by one, presents an effective way of stressing that their individual vulnerability is simultaneously communal. Du Bois thus links his characters' racial vulnerability to the prevailing system of the "Cresswell domain that lay like a mighty hand around the school"—a system that tellingly works smoothly on its own, while the focalizer of the scene falls asleep—and at the same time individualizes their fate.[32] As we learn more about Aunt Rachel, whose boys were sentenced

to labor in the chain gang for minor offenses, Jim Sykes, who was seriously injured through back-breaking work, and Bertie, who was forced into prostitution and wants to protect her baby, Du Bois's technique becomes a powerful means of representing racial vulnerability in its interlinkages with other forms of vulnerability. These include connections to a racialized criminal justice system, health threats, economic exploitation, and especially the sexual exploitation of female Black bodies, as readers gradually learn not only of Bertie's but of the main character Zora's sexual abuse as an adolescent, at the hands of the local plantation owner Harry Cresswell, in the adjoining swamp.

On the other hand, Du Bois simultaneously often zooms out of this local setting to reveal wider national and global entanglements of an African American racial vulnerability. His narrative technique, in this respect, corresponds with Chakrabarty's suggestion "to scale up our imagination of the human" in the Anthropocene.[33] The novel deploys a form of "spatial upscaling" by considering how the local, race-based semi-slavery of sharecropping and convict leases intertwine with global (capitalist) practices that have large-scale effects. Thus, although the text came into existence long before the notion of the Anthropocene was around, and even as the motivation for its upscaling overtly lies in resisting the oppression of early twentieth-century US racism, Du Bois's strategy is significant for drawing attention to how racialization and racism contributed to turning humans into a geophysical force. One of the most striking passages in this respect occurs at the beginning of a chapter tellingly titled "Cotton":

> The cry of the naked was sweeping the world. From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftain burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux freezing in Alaska; from long lines of hungry men, from patient sad-eyed women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, "Clothes, clothes!" Far away the wide black land that belts the South, where Miss Smith worked and Miss Taylor drudged and Bles and Zora dreamed, the dense black land sensed the cry and heard the bound of answering life within the vast dark breast. All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of the cotton while black attendant earth spirits swarmed above, sweating and crooning to its birth pains.[34]

Spatially "scaling up" the imagination, Du Bois in such moments inserts a global dimension into his detailed depictions of locally and individually identified vulnerable African American characters. Describing vulnerability with an emphasis on both ontological and constructed facets, the passage simultaneously speaks to the human as *homo* and *anthropos*. It alludes to an existential vulnerability of human bodies—i.e., to the *anthropos*—by representing humans as a life form vulnerable to the forces of its environs. *All* bodies are "freezing;" the ubiquitous demand for literally covering a

condition of defenselessness suggests an ontological vulnerability of the human as a biological creature, independent of discursively constructed racializing caesurae. Du Bois plays with a metaphorical power of nakedness to express Butler's assertion that "without shelter, we are vulnerable to weather, cold, heat, and disease."[35] Not just the explicit reference to a "cry of the naked," but also the use of adjectives such as "hungry," "sad-eyed," "old," and "creeping" convey a sense of an ontological vulnerability of the human animal that corresponds with the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene.

Simultaneously, however, by pointing to the diversity of circumstances under which this vulnerability occurs, Du Bois also brings a discursive dimension into play, thus alluding to the *homo*. The novel interlinks an ontological facet of human vulnerability with the social conditioning and distribution of racial vulnerability in two ways. Firstly, Du Bois anthropomorphizes the materiality of the Black Belt; for example, when describing how "the dense black land sensed the cry" of the naked. This technique connects the "dark earth" with "black attendant earth spirits"[36]—i.e., the local African American population, whose panoramically portrayed vulnerabilities are thus revealed as being shaped locally by material conditions, power struggles, and gender relations, as well as being related to global structures. Secondly, what scholars have recognized as the central theme and symbol of the novel, cotton (the titular "silver fleece"), also serves as a means of interlinking Anthropocene facets of vulnerability. Besides figuring as a "hyperobject" or giving rise to particularized forms of talk,[37] cotton in the novel becomes a poetic means to interconnect two (Anthropocene) dimensions of vulnerability. While its substance gains an ontological dimension with respect to vulnerability, as a means to prevent an ontological vulnerability of naked, freezing human bodies, the matter of cotton also intersects with a discursive dimension of vulnerability, being centrally involved in distributing forms of vulnerability via racialized power relations on a local level. Cotton, in this sense, works as what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert call a "*matterphor*, a tropic-material coil, word and substance together transported,"[38] binding together dimensions of vulnerability of the Anthropocene, as it relates the human as an "animal in need of cover" (*anthropos*) to the human as an "animal capable of providing cover" (*homo*). Ultimately, Du Bois's upscaling of the imagination through anthropomorphization and a "matterphorical" use of cotton that links *homo* and *anthropos* make his text significant for Anthropocene discourse. Revealing intersections between local forms of racial vulnerability and planetary processes, practices, and structures, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* exemplifies the potential and importance of genealogies of African American racial vulnerability in moving against a racism of indifference.

African American Epistemologies of Resistance

The Quest of the Silver Fleece, rather than merely mourning the atrocious conditions under which its African American characters have to live in the Black Belt, also celebrates the poetry of Black work and life, thus embracing a resistance potential of (racial) vulnerability. Du Bois's linking of his "black attendant earth spirits" to the "black land" foreshadows the most elevating moment of the novel,[39] when sharecroppers, led by Zora, eventually begin determining their own fate by cultivating the swamp, thereby proposing African American epistemologies of resistance that arise from a spiritual connection to the land. In the novel, such epistemologies manifest in the form of an environmental knowledge emerging from a particular space: the swamp bordering the Cresswell plantation. The text thereby reflects not only the historical role of swamps as spaces of resistance (marooning, laying out) but also signifies the swamp as an African American literary space traditionally conceptualized as both haunting and empowering. Accordingly, Du Bois sometimes stresses the "horror of the swamp" that lies in the fear and disorientation its wilderness evokes and in the human cruelties that have often marked wilderness from African American perspectives.[40] His primary symbol of these cruelties is the cabin of Elspeth, Zora's mother and the local conjurer. A place of drinking, gambling, and sexual exploitation, her home represents a kind of unrestrained, atrocious (white) human power, thus stressing the continuation of racial and gendered forms of vulnerability after abolition. The cabin, after all, marks the root of Bles and Zora's estrangement, giving rise to the central conflict of the novel, as he learns of her "impurity" resulting from her sexual abuse as an adolescent by Harry Cresswell at Elspeth's.

While thus signifying on the threatening elements of African American wilderness narratives that link such spaces to the (racial) vulnerability of female Black bodies, Du Bois's portrayal also stresses a potential empowerment through the swamp's association with African American environmental knowledge. Central in this respect is Zora and Bles's growing of cotton, the "silver fleece," their act of gardening in the swamp. When the protagonists discover "a long island" with immensely fertile soil, the swamp's "virgin and black" grounds provide the material means to resist the exploitations of the plantation system, via a form of knowledge that recognizes co-agencies of nonhuman nature.[41] Zora exemplifies such an environmental knowledge in relation to the swamp's wilderness—e.g., in her reaction to a group of rabbits that try to feed off the "silver fleece." Driving them off and catching one of them, "she talked to it earnestly: 'Brer Rabbit—poor little Brer Rabbit, don't you know you mustn't eat Zora's cotton?'" Empathic and careful not to harm the nonhuman inhabitants of the swamp, "she would show it where she had gathered piles of fragrant weeds for it and its fellows," thus expressing both an environmental ethos regarding her surroundings and highlighting that this attitude stems from a long-standing African Amer-

ican legacy of relating to the wilderness.[42] Her address ("Brer Rabbit") echoes Black folk culture, suggesting that the Black vernacular tradition had long-established, close epistemological and ethical ties to the wilderness, in ways distinct from, and resistant to, the exploitative ones that characterize the plantation system.

In parallel with his strategy regarding the representation of African American vulnerability, Du Bois "scales up" this epistemology of resistance emerging through the swamp as well, by weaving its space into the novel in three ways. Firstly, the swamp becomes a presence via its close association with the main character; Zora is inseparable from the swamp, having "been born within its borders; within its borders she had lived and grown."[43] Du Bois's strategy in this respect is a risky one, considering that the portrayed (enforced) sexual digressiveness of the main character potentially links her racial and sexual vulnerability with the criminalizing discourses of (Black) "wayward girlhood" of the time that Hartman describes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019). In this context, as Hainze points out, the novel's "depiction of Zora's development sharply accentuates the liminal position of the wayward black girl in the South."[44] At the same time, however, this social marginalization and pathologization, in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, entails a spatial and environmental liminality that, from an ecocritical perspective, translates into a means of empowerment. The fact that Zora is not merely presented as vulnerable to being marginalized as "immoral," through discourses that practiced a backlash against Black women, but, to use McKittrick's term, also becomes "ungeographic" through her links to the swamp,[45] means that she can practice an environmental resistance via this place, as part of her vulnerability, that she can imagine and create alternatives. Her love for Bles, after all, is rooted here, in the swamp, as is her intimate knowledge of how to plant the "silver fleece" and her motivation for counteracting oppression and the way in which she ultimately assumes her role as a leader, to lift her people out of the conditions of semi-slavery that the novel criticizes. Wherever Zora, the "child of the swamp," moves, the swamp and its resistance potential also move, including the towns, fields, and plantations she visits in Alabama, as well as Northern urbanities.[46]

Secondly, Du Bois's narrative technique employs intermittent flashbacks to fuse the swamp as a presence into the novel, when Zora and Bles, after breaking off their engagement, separately move to Washington, DC. There, Bles quickly rises to prominence in a presidential campaign but is eventually too honest and idealistic to survive the machinations of the capital's corrupted politics, while Zora, remaining in the background, seeks to work secretly as his inspiration. Throughout, the swamp continually recurs through both characters in allusions and flashbacks. For example, Bles, when observing the city of Washington, finds that it "somehow looked like the swamp" and, in a "lofty waiting-room of the Washington station," suddenly forgets

"everything but the field of the Silver Fleece." Zora also links her experiences to the swamp on various occasions, as she repeatedly "lived it all again—the red cabin, the moving oak, the sowing of the Fleece, and its fearful reaping."[47] Thus, the swamp, through Du Bois's use of internal focalization, remains a presence within various settings, as Zora even likens New York City to her home, marveling that the place itself "was like the swamp, always restless and changing," but "not nearly so beautiful."[48]

Most importantly, however, the third way in which Du Bois weaves the swamp and environmental knowledge into his novel's diegetic world lies in a continuous material presence of the swamp-grown cotton in the form of a wedding dress. This piece of clothing, of which Zora coincidentally gains possession and which takes on "a fetishistic quality,"[49] symbolizes the continued life of the "silver fleece." The central substance of cotton thereby attains an additional meaning through Du Bois's "upscaling" of an African American epistemology of resistance. As the (transformed) materiality of the swamp returns, remaining a material presence throughout the novel and travelling in Zora's trunk out into the world, cotton, through its spiritual potential from an African American perspective, gains yet another dimension beyond relating to *homo* and *anthropos*. The latter two Anthropocene dimensions, expressed through cotton as "matterphor," interlink in Du Bois's imagination with cotton as matter of African American epistemic resistance, represented rather melodramatically through the dress as a "talisman new-found."[50] Ultimately, both deploying the swamp to suggest a de-anthropocentrizing African American environmental knowledge and the described "upscaling" of such knowledge through the main character, a narrative technique using flashbacks and the extended matterphor of cotton deny victimization of Du Bois's cast, in the face of racial vulnerability.

African American Aesthetics of Resistance

Another means by which Du Bois denies victimization of his Black characters and conceptualizes vulnerability as part of resistance pertains to the novel's play with genre, which evinces an African American aesthetics of resistance. In turning to the new geological epoch, one of the primary concerns of literary scholars has been the question of storytelling in the Anthropocene. "If the Anthropocene indeed calls for a scaling-up of the imagination," Ursula Heise sums up what is at stake, "How might that imagination translate into narrative? What characters and plot architectures would it involve? What models do existing narrative forms offer for telling the story of our climate-changed presents and futures?"[51] Whatever the answers to such questions may ultimately turn out to be, it is clear that assessments of the efficiency of different literary forms in narrating the Anthropocene have so far largely agreed in at least one respect: declaring the (realist) novel problematic. Diagnosed by

many as a symptom of the Holocene, there is an overwhelming skepticism regarding the potential of the novel's formal strategies for representing the Anthropocene. In Jesse Oak Taylor's words, "the novel form is at once the product of and a participant in the social, historical, economic, and ecological forces responsible for bringing the Holocene to an end, framing the novel itself as a signature of the end-Holocene event." Thus, he suggests "a more expansive conception of *fiction* over and against the novel as such, in order to meet the demands of Anthropocene storytelling" and argues that "the novel must now confront the reality of a world after the Holocene stability in which it was conceived."[52]

While I generally agree that the novel's anthropocentrism earns it a problematic status in relation to the Anthropocene, a turn to African American writing nonetheless provides (more) evidence that this criticism does not apply to all types of novels and novelistic traditions. In the case of African American literature (and this is already visible with respect to narrating alternative epistemologies), it is often precisely the disruption and absence of a sense of "Holocene stability" that is at stake, since such stability, in a thoroughly racialized US society, was rarely perceivable from this tradition's perspective. If, as Ghosh reminds us, the "Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity," meaning that "those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us,"[53] the question is whether African American literature in particular has not at many points included such an anticipation of Anthropocene experience, by signifying on various traditions. In relation to the novel, for example, has it not confronted "the reality of a world after the Holocene stability in which it [novel] was conceived" all along,[54] and is this confrontation not central to texts such as *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, thus marking another potential of reading African American literature as Anthropocene literature? If what Nancy Armstrong says is true, namely that "the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same,"[55] it seems only logical that a transformed novelistic tradition from the perspective of those systematically excluded from modern subjectivity and perception of a Holocene stability must break up generic frames and conventions.

Hence, while others have responded by suggesting generic alternatives, such as the epic (Ghosh), the romance (Taylor), or science fiction (Heise), I wish to close my argument by briefly hinting at ways in which African American literature may offer viable aesthetic forms for the Anthropocene. Therefore, extending the question of storytelling in the Anthropocene, to include the African American tradition, means asking how narrative strategies of writing against race, of rejecting the human of a Holocene stability, and of resisting through vulnerability also move against fundamental processes of categorization and principles of closure that have driven

the life of a species growing into a geophysical force. In addition to what I have suggested thus far regarding a "scaling up" within both genealogies of racial vulnerability and epistemologies of resistance, I propose that Du Bois's novel also speaks to the Anthropocene in (at least) two senses by resisting fundamental principles of closure and control through its aesthetics.

The first way in which *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* does this is by providing an alternative African American vision of the settlement and cultivation of the swamp. Beyond breaking with traditional Western perspectives that regularly viewed such spaces "with fear rather than admiration …, to be filled or drained where possible,"[56] it is significant that the swamp is eventually cultivated by the African American sharecroppers in a manner that breaks with principles of closure and control by partially resisting colonialist logics. Partially, since in some ways the novel's depiction of the clearing and settling of the swamp no doubt echoes the violence found in dominant US settler narratives (e.g., a Turnerian frontier myth that emerged powerfully only a decade before Du Bois wrote his text). After Zora buys the swamp, the sharecroppers, in a communal effort, begin to penetrate its thick wilderness; the novel vividly describes how "the forest trembled as by some mighty magic, swaying and falling with crash on crash. Huge bonfires blazed and crackled, until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres."[57] The depiction leaves no doubt regarding the violent nature of the process, its destruction of nonhuman nature that is key to traditional Euro-American settler narratives. The cultivation of the swamp means, at the same time, its partial disappearance, as readers ultimately find Zora sitting in a "transformed swamp—now a swamp in name only—beneath the great oak dreaming."[58]

Yet, Du Bois's last depiction of Zora is significant regarding his take on the cultivation of the swamp, since the "great oak" signals that the process of transformation is not one of complete, utter destruction and exploitation for mere economic profit, which marks the plantation logic and colonialist desires. The novel, at this point, breaks with a principle of closure and absolute control by emphasizing instead, through the transformation of the swamp, a continuing co-existence and spiritual interaction between human and nonhuman entities and vulnerabilities that remain connected beyond the process of a cultivation that emerges from an African American environmental knowledge. Du Bois proposes that the black settlers, as "earth-spirits," gain their humanity precisely because they remain linked with the nonhuman materialities they transform because, alluding to Donna Haraway's phrase, they "make kin" through mutual transformation, rather than produce the human as ontological category, by disconnecting themselves in an act of subduing wilderness.[59] The text's strategy ultimately provides no closure narratively (in the novel), no justification culturally (as manifest destiny), and no human category essentially (of race). Instead,

this strategy reflects (resistance through) the doubled figure of the human in the Anthropocene: tricking the plantation owner into selling the swamp figures clearly as resistance to the Old South's racism, while the settling of the swamp simultaneously suggests a material process set against a Holocene logic of closure and control.

Secondly, and relatedly, the novel denies victimization through vulnerability and aesthetically resists essentializing categories and closure through its main character as a "fallen" but non-dying heroine. Zora represents a particular form of vulnerability, also through violent contemporary discourses of "colored waywardness," that is inscribed into her female Black body, being not only an unusually dark-skinned African character, as scholars have often noted,[60] but also Du Bois's means to expose and defy the rigid morals regarding "purity" of the (Victorian) novel. The protagonist—against her will and precisely due to this vulnerability—is not "pure" in the expected sense, which would normally deal her character a death sentence in the genre, and Du Bois does not refrain from letting Bles articulate this verdict explicitly: "You should have *died*!"[61] Du Bois, however, lets his novel go on with a living and ultimately thriving victim of white male aggression. The (generically highly unlikely) eventual reunion of the lovers not only represents a redemption of Black womanhood in an empathic denial of victimization of the text's vulnerable main character, but it also suggests that neither Zora's death, in accordance with generic demands, nor the narrative templates and modes of knowledge that the novel form promotes offer Black writers viable strategies. Du Bois instead implies that such templates and modes are not feasible from a perspective of the racially vulnerable, suggesting that alternative, transformed narrative templates and modes are necessary to revise the norms, morals, and principles of closure and control that govern the (Victorian) novel form. Eventually, the text's play with concepts of virginity and purity thereby also bears Anthropocene dimensions, as the discrepancy between generic expectation and actual plot development hints at how *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* reflects on a twofold mode of thinking the human that relates to the distinction between *homo* and the *anthropos*. It ultimately shows, decades before the Anthropocene was formally introduced, that the enlightenment distinction between "man as moral species" and "man as animal species" could hardly be upheld from an African American perspective—that, to use Chakrabarty's terms, the "Kantian fable of human history" is, for some, even then "coming under strain in unprecedented ways."[62] If it is true that, through the Anthropocene, the notion of "moral life representing a zone of freedom" must be reconsidered, recognizing that we cannot afford to think any longer that "the needs of our animal life will be attended to by the planet itself,"[53] Du Bois's text indeed addresses issues that lie at the heart of contemporary debates. Written from a perspective that could not easily experience moral life as a zone of freedom due to racialization, and through its negotiation of racial vulnerability in

which moral and animal life meet, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* does address fundamental Anthropocene questions.

Conclusion

My reading of Du Bois's novel suggests that African American literature has much to say with respect to (race in) the Anthropocene, as the tradition often simultaneously speaks to both Du Bois's "color line" and Buell's "planetary life." Rereading such literature via a (Butlerian) focus on racial vulnerability and through the Anthropocene has broader implications for a variety of fields and questions. Without suggesting exhaustiveness, I believe that there are at least three primary directions in which future research might move. First, it is my hope that my interpretation of Du Bois's first venture into fiction and its tracing of the genealogical, epistemological, and aesthetic potentials of African American literature may invite additional reinterpretations of classic works along similar lines. An ecocritical reading of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* through the lens of racial vulnerability implies that other African American novels of the (early) twentieth century, by writers such as Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, are also worth reconsidering as parts of an African American literary archive that chronicles racial vulnerabilities that have shaped our Anthropocene past and present. Secondly, in relation to vulnerability studies but also other fields that turn to questions of vulnerability (e.g., US ethnic studies, African American studies), my rereading of Du Bois's novel stresses once more the breadth of resistance potentials that may emerge from diverse forms of vulnerability and therefore might further inspire more investigations of the environmental dimensions of resistance through vulnerability. In other words, it may contribute to including ecocritical potentials more extensively in explorations of the "double edge of vulnerability—its connection to regulation, subjugation, and death on one hand, and its power to bring together and mobilize political agency on the other," while at the same time encouraging more work that explicitly focuses on vulnerability in ecocriticism.[64]

Lastly, and perhaps most critically, rereading African American literature along the suggested lines should contribute to raising more awareness in Anthropocene scholarship regarding the significant role of racial processes in the making and shaping of the new geological epoch. Although the Anthropocene, as a concept, must remain rooted in the natural sciences to have meaning, we cannot risk forgetting race as a human historical factor shaping the new age, also because racialization and racism continue to affect contemporary life in systemic, often hidden ways, and on various scales, perpetuating (racial) vulnerabilities created in the past. If this happened (and, sadly, there are signs that it might), the Anthropocene could lose its distinct political potential, its hopefulness, and agency as a form of discourse. Texts such as *The*

Quest of the Silver Fleece and African American literature can be vital in this respect, as a means of acting against an imminent amnesia about race and an Anthropocene racism of indifference, by providing much needed genealogies as well as alternative forms of knowledge and narrative techniques for our current moment.

Notes

1 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), v.

2 Ecocriticism on Du Bois typically focuses on his non-fiction, especially *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and includes contributions e.g. by Scott Hicks, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Richard Wright: Toward an Ecocriticism of Color," *Callaloo* 29, no. 1 (2006), DOI: 10.1353/cal.2006.0054; Anne Raine, "Du Bois's Ambient Poetics: Rethinking Environmental Imagination in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *Callaloo* 36, no. 2 (2013), DOI: 10.1353/cal.2013.0129; Michael J. Beilfuss, "Ironic Pastorals and Beautiful Swamps: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Troubled Landscapes of the American South," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no. 3 (2015), DOI: 10.1093/isle/isv025. A chapter in John Claborn's *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature* (2018) provides an insightful reading of Du Bois's autobiographical collection *Darkwater* (1920); John Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment in African-American Literature, 1895–1941* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

3 Readings of African American literature that focus explicitly on the Anthropocene are rare so far. A recent exception that turns to the Anthropocene and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is found in Rebekah Taylor-Wisemen, "Reading *Cane* in the Anthropocene: Toomer on Race, Power, and Nature," *Mississippi Quarterly* 70/71, no. 3 (2017/2018), DOI: 10.1353/mss.2017.0018.

4 Rob Nixon, "Anthropocene 2," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 45.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene 1," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 39.

6 Laura Pulido, "Racism and the Anthropocene," in *Future Remains: A Cabinet of Curiosities for the Anthropocene*, ed. Gregg Mitman, Marco Armiero, and Robert S. Emmett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Nicholas Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene; Or, the Geological Color Line," in *After Extinction*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Nancy Tuana, "Climate Apartheid: The Forgetting of Race in the Anthropocene," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 2 (2019), DOI: 10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0001.

7 Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3. Critiques that specifically target the omission of racial and colonial histories can be found (adding to those cited in the previous note) in Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso Books, 2016); Jason W. Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropo-*

cene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene,… Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019), DOI: 10.1111/gec3.12438; the special issue "Race and the Anthropocene" (2019) of *Critical Philosophy of Race*.

8 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

9 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton, 2019); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

10 Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris, "Why is American Poverty Still Colored in the Twenty-First Century?" in *The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist*, ed. Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 4.

11 Cornel West, "Conversation with Bell Hooks," in *The Cornel West Reader*, ed. Cornel West (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 542.

12 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 1; Lindgren Johnson, *Race Matters, Animal Matters: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1838–1934* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018); Yusoff, *Black Anthropocenes*.

13 As part of a by now firmly established ecocriticism on African American literature, such studies seem to mark a new direction in this field. My impression is that while earlier work primarily aimed to trace the environmental aesthetics and modes of African American literature (for an overview of the field, see the introduction in Claborn, *Civil Rights and the Environment*), more recent engagements turn explicitly to interrogating the human as a discursive and ontological category. While not suggesting clear demarcations between these strategies, fundamentally questioning the category of the human through African American (literary) discourse is the main concern not only of the studies mentioned above, which often respond to posthumanist thought, but also, in this case responding to Anthropocene discourse, the focus of the following.

14 Tuija Pulkkinen, "Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought: A Politics of Philosophy Point of View," *Redescriptions* 23, no. 2 (2020): 152, DOI: 10.33134/rds.342.

15 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 24.

16 Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, "Introduction," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7, 1.

17 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 25.

18 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction" 5.

19 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 395.

20 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 13.

21 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 31.

22 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 201, DOI: 10.1086/596640.

23 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene: The Tanner Lectures in Human Values" (Yale University, 2015), 147, https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-/c/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf.

24 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 14, DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2012.0007.

25 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 19.

26 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 7–8.

27 Pulido, "Racism and the Anthropocene," 118.

28 Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene," 125.

29 Mirzoeff, "It's Not the Anthropocene," 125.

30 This even more so since Du Bois is one of those writers that pioneering ecocritical work on African American perspectives has frequently turned to. His cotton novel, by contrast, has rarely been considered ecocritically, let alone in the context of the Anthropocene, even as it has recently been revalued by scholars (see, e.g., Alex Benson, "Gossypoglossia: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Pragmatics of Dialogue," *Narrative* 27, no. 2 [2019], DOI: 10.1353/nar.2019.0012). The only extensive environmentally oriented readings so far are those by Stephen Knadler, "Narrating Slow Violence: Post-Reconstruction's Necropolitics and Speculating Beyond Liberal Antirace Fiction," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 5, no. 1 (2017), DOI: 10.1353/jnc.2017.0003; and Benjamin Child, "The Plantation Countermelodies of Dunbar and Du Bois: Writing Agropolitical Subjecthood in the Nadir," *American Literature* 91, no. 3 (2019), DOI: 10.1215/00029831-7722128. An earlier treatment that notes the importance of Du Bois's depictions of nature in the novel is Arlene Elder, "Swamp Versus Plantation: Symbolic Structure in W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," *Phylon* 34, no. 4 (1973), DOI: 10.2307/274251.

31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68–69.

32 Du Bois, *Quest*, 68.

33 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 206.

34 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

35 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 13.

36 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

37 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Child, "The Plantation Countermelodies of Dunbar and Du Bois"; Benson, "Gossypoglossia."

38 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, "Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements," in *Elemental Ecocriticism*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 11.

39 Du Bois, *Quest*, 25.

40 Du Bois, *Quest*, 196.

41 Du Bois, *Quest*, 38.

42 Du Bois, *Quest*, 62.

43 Du Bois, *Quest*, 82.

44 Emily Hainze, "'Wayward and Untrained Years': Reforming the 'Wayward Girl' in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and *Jennie Gerhardt*," *Studies in American Fiction* 46, no. 2 (2019): 358, DOI: 10.1353/saf.2019.0015.

45 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

46 Du Bois, *Quest*, 19.

47 Du Bois, *Quest*, 173, 206, 163.

48 Du Bois, *Quest*, 133.

49 Gina M. Rossetti, "Turning the Corner: Romance as Economic Critique in Norris's Trilogy of Wheat and Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*," *Studies in American Naturalism* 7, no. 1 (2012): 44, DOI: 10.1353/san.2012.0000; see also M. Giulia Fabi, "To Fashion the Wonderful Garment: W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," in *Extravagances: Habits of Being 4*, ed. Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

50 Du Bois, *Quest*, 123.

51 Ursula K. Heise, "Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene," *ELH* 86, no. 2 (2019): 279, DOI: 10.1353/elh.2019.0015.

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From Crisis to Cata/Strophe

Prepositional Poetics as Decolonizing Praxis

Jennifer A. Reimer

Abstract

This article shows how Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria* (2016) and Raquel Salas Rivera's *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (2019) turn the ongoing catastrophe of coloniality into a visual grammar of/for loss. Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria* offers a prepositional poetics to visualize the catastrophe of Mediterranean migrant crossings within the spacetime of an oceanic coloniality that joins Mediterranean to Atlantic and Caribbean. Raquel Salas Rivera's poetic response to Hurricane María invokes prepositional relationships to reveal and contest the United States' existing hierarchies of colonial-imperial power. Through form, their poetry visualizes how witness, survival, and mourning become decolonizing tactics of resistance. In the two texts, I identify a prepositional poetics that, by signaling movements through space and time, locates the specific catastrophes of displacement and climate change disaster in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean as part of a continuum of coloniality that stretches from the sixteenth century to the present.

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From Crisis to Cata/Strophe

Prepositional Poetics as Decolonizing Praxis

Jennifer A. Reimer

As this special issue demonstrates, the present attentiveness to vulnerability within American studies (and similar disciplines) is doing urgent work in naming current conditions of social, political, and economic precarity as processes inextricably linked to other processes that define our world today: neoliberalism, imperialism, coloniality, racialization, white supremacy, and all exercises of power that contribute to inequality. As Judith Butler and others have argued, precarious conditions not only shape lived experiences, but they are also shaped by them. Literary-cultural critics have responded by pointing to cultural texts as spaces where processes of precarity and vulnerable subjectivities are embodied through art, giving voice to marginalized identities, histories, and experiences. Such scholarship is important for the ways in which it recognizes and makes visible content previously excluded from academic conversations. An opportunity exists, however, for literary-cultural critics to also examine how vulnerability takes *shape and form* in cultural texts. If culture makers, whose art raises novel or enhanced awareness around vulnerable communities, can be said to be oppositional to domination and operations of power, is it possible that aesthetics, too, contains oppositional content? How do style and form *also* contribute to giving visibility to vulnerable, precarious lives? What potential might form have in decolonizing and dismantling power? These questions, which I and others have discussed elsewhere,[1] motivate this essay's case study in the decolonizing aesthetics of contemporary American poetry and poetics. I draw on current trends of vulnerability in American studies and theories of social precarity to show how Aracelis Girmay's (she/her) *The Black Maria* (2016) and Raquel Salas Rivera's (he/they) *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (2019) turn the ongoing catastrophe of coloniality into a visual grammar of/for loss. Through form, their poetry visualizes how witnessing, surviving, and mourning become decolonizing tactics of resistance.

Precarity as Vulnerable Resistance in the Anthropocene

In using precarity as a critical lens for theorizing contemporary American poetry by writers of color, I return to Judith Butler's useful definition of precarity as "a politically induced condition in which certain populations … 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." Such violence includes "arbitrary state violence and … other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection."[2] My understanding of precarity as a form of vulnerability positions Butlerian precarity within the affective modes experienced by bodies racialized outside of normative whiteness that José E. Muñoz named "feeling brown,"[3] in order to name the specific ways in which forms of difference (such as race) differentiate experiences of vulnerability (essentially, while all bodies experience vulnerability not all bodies experience vulnerability in the same ways). However, I am also influenced by the work on vulnerability collected in the *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) anthology edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, which foregrounds the potential for agency, activism, and solidarity over passivity and wounding.[4] Like the co-editors, I situate vulnerability within queer, feminist, and critical race work to highlight the potential for vulnerability as resistance.

This contribution extends the special issue's call to consider vulnerability's potential for productive change by linking theories of social precarity to decolonial theory and eco-criticism. In showing how climate change is part of an ongoing process of coloniality, which both creates and exacerbates conditions of social, economic, and political precarity for colonized and formerly colonized subjects, this essay's case studies posit vulnerability as a possible node of decolonizing praxis through oppositional poetics. Reading vulnerability through decolonial thinking offers specific language for naming the larger structural forces, including racism, white supremacy, and persistent colonial hierarchies, that create and exacerbate the conditions of catastrophe that both Girmay and Salas Rivera respond to in their books: for Girmay, precarity names the conditions that catalyze migration from the Global South, as well as the dangers of the Mediterranean migrant crossing and failure of the international community to safeguard im/migrant lives; for Salas Rivera, it is the failure of the US government to effectively intervene in Puerto Rico's humanitarian crisis in the days, weeks, and months after Hurricane María.

While Butler's notion of precarity clarifies the role of the state in creating conditions of life that give rise to precarious identities, such as those that Muñoz articulates to social politics, as an existential, philosophical, and phenomenological descriptor, precarity can easily be over-simplified into a state of affairs, a fixed

identity or extreme case of suffering. In "Precarious Writings" (2021), Maribel Casas-Cortés reframes Butler's precarity as "an existential condition of vulnerability," which emphasizes the "precaritization" of existence. In converting adjective to noun, Casas-Cortés highlights precarity as an *ongoing ambivalent process*. Excavating the uses of precarity amongst grassroots social movements in southern Europe, Casas-Cortés argues that shared conditions of vulnerability can be, and have been, mobilized as fluid spaces for political creation. Precarity-as-vulnerability becomes a subversive platform for reform, renewing subjectivities, and rallying collective action: "Precarity brings a profound awareness of shared vulnerability—including experiences of production, reproduction, and mobility. Those experiences are in turn deeply ambivalent, leading to a reinvigorated politicization of precarity itself and a desire to 'think in common' in the midst of fragmentation."[5] Precarity, as a condition of vulnerability filled with political potential, albeit ambivalent potential, is a useful and productive lens for thinking through the precarious poetics of Girmay and Salas Rivera when aligned with current theories of decolonial thinking. In emphasizing the precaritization of existence, Casas-Cortés's precarity-as-vulnerable-process invites comparison to the coloniality of power, the devastating "matrix of power, knowledge, and way of being" that Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, María Lugones, and others have theorized.[6]

Recently, decolonial thinkers have also begun to examine the intersection of coloniality and climate change as deeply interconnected processes that are both producing and exacerbating conditions of shared vulnerability. As the consequences of climate change become increasingly visible as material conditions of current life, decolonial scholars point to the damage caused by certain ways of inhabiting the earth that are specific to modernity.[7] In *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (2017), Macarena Gómez-Barris examines the origins and afterlife of an extractive global economy installed by colonial capitalism in the sixteenth century to turn natural resources into global commodities. Her book takes care to emphasize indigenous resistance, "show[ing] how the embodied activities that reject colonialism continue to alter and expand how we see and what we know about Indigenous spaces especially within the extractive zone."[8] Her work invites us to (re)consider indigenous and African-descendant perspectives on the natural world that engage rather than extract. A centering on indigenous modes of survival and resistance is crucial to the work of a decolonial ecocriticism, which continues to highlight "the relationship between climate policies and practices of distorting, marginalizing or disregarding the ways of knowing and experiences of those most affected by climate change."[9] As such, indigenous scholarship has been central in decolonial critiques of Western ways of organizing the human and nonhuman world whose extractive and exploit-

ative practices were directly responsible for indigenous genocide and continue to do active harm to indigenous lives, lands, and ways of being.[10]

But the links between our modern/colonial past and our current state of climate "crisis" are not simply located in humanities scholarship. A widely circulated article by the scientific journal *Nature* in 2021 identified colonial biases at the heart of ecological research and policy and outlined five concrete interventions that incorporate non-Western ways of understanding the natural environment and humans' place within and which promote inclusive and ethical ecological practices.[11] International nongovernmental organizations are also making the connection. In a white paper for *The Conversation*, Harriet Mercer noted how the International Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) April 2022 report included the term "colonialism" in their summary to argue that colonialism has "exacerbated" the effects of climate change.[12] Although the IPCC has been reporting on climate change since 1990, the April 2022 report marks the first time that the organization has explicitly named climate change as part of a global, colonial heritage.

Climate change, as a process linked to coloniality's racial past, present, and future, plays a central, contributing role in the environmental-humanitarian situations that frame Girmay and Salas Rivera's poetry. Girmay's *The Black Maria* traces the current "crisis" of migration from North Africa to the EU, articulating the precarious conditions that drive people from their homeland into vulnerable sea-crossings, back to the history of the Black Atlantic slave trade and her own family history. Yet, part of the urgency in her poetic excavation of transnational circulations (both voluntary and forced) must be contextualized within processes of climate change that have been internationally recognized as significant factors in migration and displacement trends from vulnerable regions. A European Parliament paper from 2022 on "The Future of Climate Migration" cites an increase in the effects of global warming as significant factors driving border crossing and migration.[13] Thus, the vulnerable migrant subjects that her poetry visualizes (and eulogizes) are not coincidental, nor are they solely products of state violence or state failures; their shared vulnerability has been created out of ongoing and overlapping processes of historical and contemporary precarity whose coloniality is deeply imbedded in the current environmental push factors of migration.

In Raquel Salas Rivera's *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*, the crisis under critique is 2017's Hurricane María, a natural disaster whose magnitude and scale has been linked to climate change. A 2019 article by NPR cited several post-hurricane studies that connected the storm's rain magnitude to warming air oceans.[14] Indeed, scientists found that a storm such as Hurricane María is five times more likely to occur today than it would have in the 1950s, when global warmings effects

were only just emerging.[15] Yet, a strictly environmental lens that implicates climate change as the main factor contributing to the widespread devastation of Hurricane María misses the crucial link between Puerto Rico's colonial past and present and the ways in which centuries of colonial and imperial domination made the island *especially vulnerable* to natural disasters. Scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres draw attention to how the operations of colonial-imperial power on the island created "a perfect storm of catastrophe." In his contribution to *Aftershocks of Disaster* (2019), Maldonado-Torres asserts: "Hurricane María is a catastrophe inseparable from the catastrophe of Puerto Rican colonialism (a colonialism that continues in liberal, conservative, neoliberal, and neo-fascist times) and the catastrophe of modernity/coloniality." Indeed, Hurricane María was not "simply a natural event," and understanding the implications of the storm "require[s] the consideration of ideologies, attitudes, and social, economic, and political systems, among other factors."[16]

As responses to humanitarian crises that are undercut by larger historical processes of exploitation, both *The Black Maria* and *while they sleep* ask readers to follow the thread of coloniality through current conditions of climate change, in order to more fully apprehend the conditions of vulnerability under which (and into) they write. In doing so, Girmay and Salas Rivera's texts also invite us to re-consider the language of crisis.

Cata/Strophe: The Coloniality of Power and Countercatastrophic Response

By calling Hurricane María a "catastrophe" instead of a "crisis" or "disaster," Maldonado-Torres seeks to emphasize Hurricane María as an exceptional event, unique from previous "crises" or "disasters." While the three terms are often used interchangeably to describe forms of devastation and responses to devastation, Maldonado-Torres argues that their differences have important implications for Caribbean thinking and decoloniality. In his theorizing, "crisis," which is etymologically related to the concept of critique and invokes an "array of meanings related to choosing, judging, and deciding," is strongly implicated in Western modern thought (with its emphasis on rationality).[17] On the other hand, disaster's etymological roots point to its association with ill-fortune or fate, which, although these words might capture the sense of despair and lament, can also be reduced to an ahistorical misfortune. "A crisis," according to Maldonado-Torres, "is a moment when decision is needed, while in a disaster it is as if a decision has already been taken and the outcome revealed. It is as if the moment of decision has come and gone unnoticed; disaster seems to be the result of fate, as if something went wrong in the universe."[18] If both crisis and disaster fail to capture the particular nature of Hurricane María as an outcome of a colonial world system,

whose forms of domination and control have contributed to climate change, could "catastrophe" do a better job?

The Greek origins of catastrophe invoke neither decision nor fate but rather a dramatic turn of events, or a reversal. Maldonado-Torres explains that "the root words in Greek are *kata* (down) and *strephein* (turn)," which means that we can understand catastrophe as an unexpected downturn of events. In fact, "unlike disaster, which makes one wonder about fate, . . . like crisis, which calls for a diagnosis, catastrophe calls for thinking; unlike crisis, however, catastrophe challenges all existing cognitive frameworks." Catastrophe is a spatio-temporal disruption—unlike crisis or disaster it carries a hint of "rupture, surprise, and novelty."[19]

If crisis and disaster belong to practices of critique and critical theory, catastrophe, Maldonado-Torres suggests, has much more relevance for decolonial thought, creation, and praxis. The catastrophic nature of Hurricane María is inextricably tied up with other scales of catastrophe, particularly the "downturn" that begins with the Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century and continues through 1898 to the present moment. The birth of the modern world system (we could also name this the birth of the Anthropocene) is deeply connected to the catastrophic loss of indigenous life. It also marks the beginning of a process of normalizing catastrophe, "evident in the form of continued dehumanization, expropriation, slavery (and its aftermaths), and genocide, otherwise known as coloniality . . . What appears as catastrophic in modern colonialism is not only the direct colonial relations that have existed at least since the early moments of the New World's 'discovery,' but also the naturalization of the relationship between colonizer and colonized and the reproduction of this naturalization, not only in cultures, institutions, and psyches of normative subjects, but also in colonized peoples themselves."[20] Thus, catastrophe effectively describes the temporal rupture (turn) created by colonization, names its "ongoingness" as a process of coloniality, and implicates the ecological devastation that has come to define the Anthropocene, thereby aligning past, present, and future. Catastrophe thus is *prepositional* in both space and time.

Prepositions, of course, are words that name a relation between things—words such as "on," "in," "under," "above," "of," "next to," "from," "alongside," and "between." They name our positions and the positions of things around us, in space and time. For the purposes of this essay, if we understand space as referring to diaspora and the modern world system, and time as process, specifically the nonlinear (but continuous) processes of coloniality and precarity, the poetic invocation of prepositions in Girmay's and Salas Rivera's works locate the poems and their subjects within a vulnerable spacetime of diaspora and coloniality. This precarious, vulnerable spacetime is catastrophic, where *kata* (down) invokes the specter of drowning at sea (Girmay) or

the geographical and geopolitical location of Puerto Rico (Salas Rivera) and the subjugated position of former and current colonies within the modern, colonial world system (both). *Strephein* (turn) names the active and entangled processes of coloniality and vulnerability. If, as Maldonado-Torres claims, "thinking about catastrophe in the Caribbean"—and, I'll add, the Mediterranean—"leads to countercatastrophic responses such as decolonial thinking and decolonial aesthetics and poetics,"[21] what might the prepositional, countercatastrophic poetics of Girmay and Salas Rivera suggest to us about the potential of a decolonial aesthetics?

By asking how colonial spacetime emerges from and shapes oppositional poetry, my question takes up Maldonado-Torres's call, while building on the work of literary scholars such as Brian Russell Roberts who critique American imperialism's spacetime through prepositional readings of literary texts. Although he doesn't name his approach "prepositional," Roberts's *Borderwaters* (2021) introduces the concept of "archipelagic thinking" by referring to the etymological roots of "archipelago" in Greek, which, like catastrophe, name a spatial-temporal positioning: *pelago* signifies "deep, abyss, gulf, pool." Roberts expands the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the archipelago by moving away from a static ontological category and toward "a thought template" altogether messier—"material, metaphorical, translational, terraqueous, archipelagizing, geoformal, and temporally scalar."[22] Indeed, archipelagos are as temporal as they are spatial in his theorizing, naming not only the "deep" time of prehistory (geological time) but also gesturing toward planetary futurities. Archipelagic thinking draws on the prepositional positioning of below/under/depth to enact a type of critical depth-sounding to re-map the United States and the planet, moving between, across, and through surfaces and depths, tumbling with archipelagic materiality, "even as they churn up and churn with US-centric and US-eccentric self-perceptions and cultural forms."[23] Positioned as both material and metaphor—but constantly moving—through prepositional relationships to space and time, "archipelagic thinking" usefully draws the Mediterranean and the Caribbean,[24] the two archipelagic spaces Girmay's and Salas Rivera's poetry plumbs from surface to depth and depth to surface, into an "archipelagic gyre, or a set of island- and ocean-oriented philosophical currents that have neither descended from nor depended on the United States for their genesis and vitality."[25] I am interested in diffracting Roberts's gyre, that "set of island-and ocean-oriented philosophical currents," through a prismatic viewing of prepositional positioning, (re)created by the catastrophe of coloniality, and creating a decolonial, countercatastrophic poetic form.

A prepositional poetic analysis, whose vectors include countercatastrophic decoloniality and archipelagic thinking, situates Girmay's and Salas Rivera's poetry within a growing canon of poetry by writers of color in the United States (and, increasingly, in Great Britain) who turn to oppositional form to name and critique conditions of

vulnerability and precarity and the resulting marginalized, vulnerable subjectivities. These poets operate at the intersection of politics (identity) and innovation (avant-garde traditions) in order to expose expectations around "authentic" voice in poetry by writers of color.[26] In Black and African American literary scholarship, critics such as Erica Hunt, Nathanial Mackey, and Fred Moten position disruptions, breaks, improvisations, and sound-making in Black performances as inextricable from the racial politics of slavery and blackness.[27] Timothy Yu, Barbara Jane Reyes, and Craig Santos Perez have theorized the aesthetics of racial-colonial oppression made visible in Asian American and Pacific Island poetry, variously arguing that poetic form "burrows into," "work[s] out," or "currents" social-political forms of domination and vulnerable subjectivities.[28] In considering contemporary Latinx poetry in the United States, poet J. Michael Martinez calls such work "Ethno-vative" for the ways in which they draw on histories of avant-garde practices to perform "a type of social critique in their formal strategies."[29] "Ethno-vative" poetry, he asserts, dramatizes political *and* formal resistance to aesthetic, economic, and political oppression.

Aracelis Girmay and Raquel Salas Rivera's poetry unequivocally do such "ethno-vative" work in the way their work responds formally and politically to catastrophic vulnerabilities. Both *The Black Maria* and *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* use a prepositional poetics to signal movements through space and time. These innovative, spatial and temporal shifts implicate the catastrophe of displacement and natural disaster as being specifically located (in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean) while also existing on a continuum of coloniality that stretches from the sixteenth century into the present, enacting pointed critiques of US imperialism.

Diasporic Diffractions: Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria*

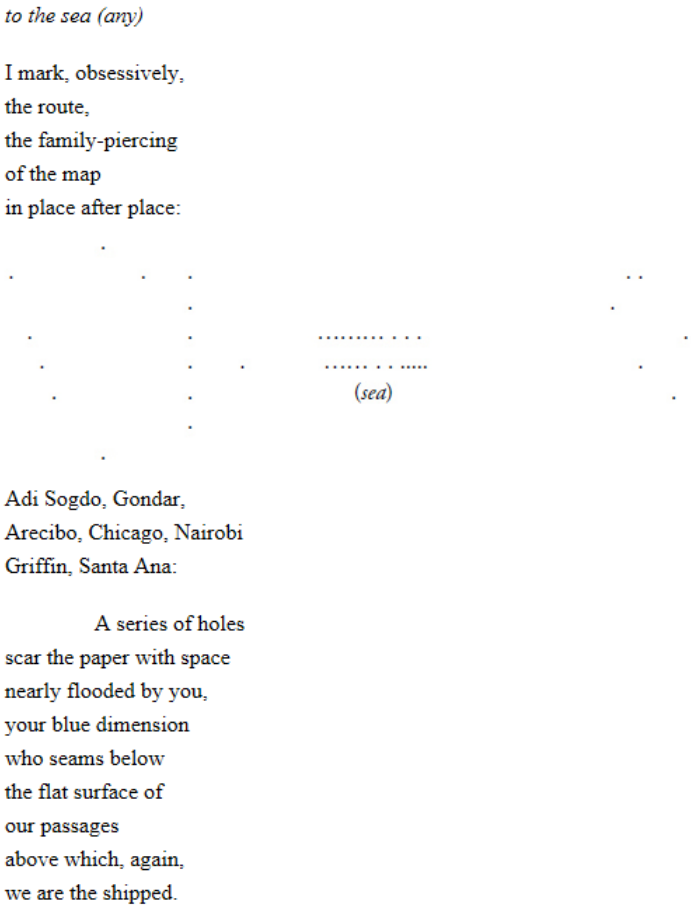
Aracelis Girmay's award-winning 2016 collection, *The Black Maria*, investigates African diasporic histories with a central focus on the lives of Eritrean refugees. The poet herself identifies as Eritrean, Puerto Rican, and African American, identities that are constitutive of how her poetry takes up the consequences of racism in American public life and culture. Thematically, the poems in the collection explore migration, colonialism and imperialism, as well as the intersections of death and diaspora. Both elegy to and eulogy for im/migrant subjects and subjectivities, the book's forms are innovative and hybrid, weaving poetry, prose, and a long poem that also takes the form of a play.

The collection's opening section, "elelegy,"[30] begins by situating the poem-as-play within the context of North African–Mediterranean migration, displacement, and death. An epigraph formed into a tight column of two stacked blocks on the opening left page reads: "It is estimated that over 20,000 people have died at sea making the

journey from North Africa to Europe in the past two decades. On October 3, 2013, it is estimated that 300 people died at sea off the coast of Lampedusa. Those on board the boat that sank were nearly all Eritrean." In the second block, Girmay writes that the following cycle of poems focuses on Eritrean history, on the one hand, "as this is a history I am somewhat familiar with as someone of its diaspora," but also on the shared history and experiences of "people searching for political asylum and opportunity (both)," which is "much larger than Eritrean history alone."[31] In connecting the particular context of Eritrean displacement and migration to a larger, shared history, the opening text, like the situated body of the poet herself, connects the contemporary catastrophe of Black diaspora across (under) the Mediterranean to those other deadly sites of Black diaspora: the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Girmay thus situates the work in both space and time, where geography and history are simultaneously specific and transnational, located yet continuous, the past-as-present-as-past circulations (turns, *strephein*) of coloniality. Girmay herself acknowledges these transnational connections in the play-as-poem's exposition. In the "where" section, she lists "the Mediterranean Sea // the Red Sea // the Caribbean Sea // the Atlantic Ocean // the Afterworld Sea/Sea of Death / any sea."[32]

In the "elelegy" cycle, I locate Girmay's prepositional poetics within the sub-cycle of poems titled "to the sea," a series whose form and content map the catastrophe of migrant crossings. "To the sea, any" is a visual and textual mapping whose content *and* form enact prepositional migrations and movements (Illustration 1). The placement of dots across the upper third of the page represent the speaker's act of locating their family's route (in the way that we might document travel by placing pushpins in a map of the world) and also imprints the larger dimensions of the sea itself. The two parallel lines of dots represent the sea's "seam." Girmay describes the "blue dimension" of this border-seam both horizontally and vertically, invoking prepositions to describe the act of crossings: "who seams below / the flat surface of / our passages / above which, again / we are the shipped."[33] Here, the poetic language of the stanza as well as the dot mapping describe and visualize a prepositional relationship to the sea border, where the horizontal crossing (over)—the above—represents life, or the potential for a new life, and the vertical crossing (descent, below, down) represents death. Thus, the sea-as-border is not only geopolitical but also metaphorical; the sea's surface becomes the liminal space between the possibility of life and the certainty of death.

Girmay's prepositional play continues in a later poem in "elelegy," "Inside the sea, there is more." Again, the poem's innovative form uses visual techniques and poetic language to describe the catastrophe of migrant crossing prepositionally through space and time (Illustration 2). Here, we are drawn "inside" the sea where the vertical movement is not only the crossing (over) from surface to depth-death but



to the sea (any)

I mark, obsessively,
the route,
the family-piercing
of the map
in place after place:

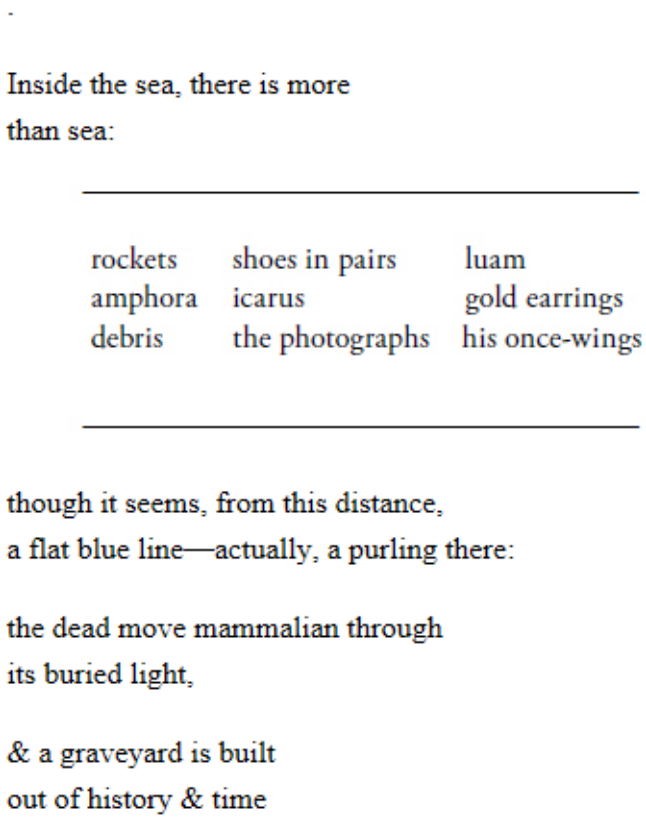
(*sea*)

Adi Sogdo, Gondar,
Arecibo, Chicago, Nairobi
Griffin, Santa Ana:

A series of holes
scar the paper with space
nearly flooded by you,
your blue dimension
who seams below
the flat surface of
our passages
above which, again,
we are the shipped.

Illustration 1: Textual and visual mapping in *The Black Maria*.
From Aracelis Girmay, *The Black Maria* (BOA Editions, 2016). Used by permission from the publisher.

another nested series of spacetime within the sea itself. Indeed, Girmay cautions us against falling into the deception of surface-level reading. In a homophonic recall to the previous "seam," she tells us that "though it seems, from this distance, / a flat blue line—actually, a purling there: / the dead move mammalian through / its buried light."[34] She pulls (purls) us below the surface to witness movement through space and time, represented by a catalogue of detritus. The horizontal lines that frame the 3x3 catalogue of nouns recreate the sea's above/below borders. Below the surface yet above or on the seafloor are the detritus of im/migrant lives: "debris," "shoes in pairs," "photographs," "gold earrings." Also, there are the remnants of history and mythology: "amphora," "icarus," "luam,"[35] "his once-wings." It is a "graveyard" "built / out of history & time."[36]



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Inside the sea, there is more
than sea:

---

rockets	shoes in pairs	luam
amphora	icarus	gold earrings
debris	the photographs	his once-wings

---

though it seems, from this distance,
a flat blue line—actually, a purling there:

the dead move mammalian through
its buried light,

& a graveyard is built
out of history & time

Illustration 2: Visual and verbal poetics combine to create different spacetimes in *The Black Maria*.
From Aracelis Girmay, *The Black Maria* (BOA Editions, 2016). Used by permission from the publisher.

The submersion-immersion perspective on im/migrant life and death that the poem visualizes speaks to the kind of "tidalectic diffractions" theorized by Elizabeth DeLoughery and Tatiana Flores. Building on Kamu Brathwaite, they define tidalectics "as a kind of submarine immersion and ocean intimacy that is constituted by an entangled ontology of diffraction." Diffraction, in the scientific sense, refers to the "bending of a line of sight, the way an object in the water, when viewed from above or below, is distorted."[37] The ocean's movement, and our perception of it through light, are determined by waves of diffraction.[38] A literal and metaphorical turning (*strephein*) from a straight line, a diffraction, captures a range of prepositional perspectives, not only the colonial *aerial-above* but also the messier *below*, *within*, *across*, and *from* perspectives, which up-end linearity and cohesion. Tidalectic diffraction, according to DeLoughery and Flores, "demands a kind of metaphorical immersion

on the part of the viewer, to submerge in order to have an ontological engagement with the history of representing the Caribbean."[39] Girmay's prepositional poetics in "Inside the sea, there is more" enact this very dynamic in a transnational Mediterranean context. By drawing us below the surface, we are forced to immerse ourselves in a confrontation with the catastrophe of history made visible in the submerged, fragmented object-archive of im/migrant lives.

Fragmented Hierarchies: Raquel Salas Rivera's *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*

If Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria* offers a prepositional poetics to visualize the catastrophe of Mediterranean migrant crossings within the spacetime of an oceanic coloniality that joins Mediterranean to Atlantic and Caribbean, Raquel Salas Rivera's 2019 poetic response to Hurricane María invokes prepositional relationships to reveal and contest the United States' existing hierarchies of colonial-imperial power. *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* puts form at the center of the book's construction. The bulk of the collection is arranged in dialogic fragments; a fragment of text in English appears at the top of the page, accompanied by a footnote that directs readers to a fragment in Spanish at the bottom of the page. The Spanish text is not a translation of the English, nor is there always an obvious (linear, cohesive) correspondence between what is above and what is below. Both the English and Spanish texts are fragments of discursive responses to Hurricane María, from media or overheard conversations, sometimes taken out of context and juxtaposed against the blank white space, which occupies most of the page's field.

The specific ecological context of Hurricane María's devastation, coupled with Puerto Rico's colonial past and present, drive Salas Rivera's formal choices in their book. The full impact of the September 2017 hurricane cannot be understood without considering Puerto Rico's imperial relationship with the United States as a colony, as well as the pre-existing catastrophe of Puerto Rican debt. Puerto Rico became a "territory" of the United States in 1898, as a condition of the Treaty of Paris that ended the war between the United States and Spain. Puerto Ricans became US citizens in 1917, under the Jones Act,[40] and, in 1953, the status of Puerto Rico was changed from territory to commonwealth. As a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Ricans and US mainlanders share "common citizenship, common defense, common currency, and a common market. However, Puerto Ricans do not pay federal taxes, and are denied voting representation in the U. S. Congress."[41] Commonwealth status legislates the uneven relationship between the US and Puerto Rico to this day.

Puerto Rico's centuries-long status as first a Spanish colony and then, essentially, a US colony, has contributed, in a general sense, to the island's current economic

precarity,[42] although most economists locate one origin of Puerto Rico's debt crisis in the mid-1990s, when the Puerto Rican government borrowed heavily to fight a recession.[43] By 2017, when Hurricane María hit, the island's debt had surpassed its GDP and Puerto Rico had filed for bankruptcy—the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. Currently, Puerto Rico holds around $74 billion in bond debt and $49 billion in unfunded pension obligations.

Puerto Rico's precarious economic condition does not exist outside the uneven operations of the coloniality of power. In *Colonial Debts* (2021), Rocío Zambrana puts it bluntly: "debt functions as a form of coloniality." Debt, she argues,

> actualizes, adapts, reinscribes race/gender/class posited by the history of colonial violence that produced the modern capitalist world. Debt does so responding to altered material and historical conditions, building on rather than annihilating difference, incommensurability, heterogeneity in the very reproduction of life—in labor, authority, subjectivity. Debt, then, is key to the rearticulation/reinstallation of colonial life in the current economic-political juncture. In the case of Puerto Rico, the afterlife of the colonial world posits the colonial condition, the territorial status, anew. It does so by actualizing the work of race/gender/class evident in the unequal distribution of precariousness, dispossession, and violence in the territory.[44]

Puerto Rico's economic downturn (*kata*/*strephein*) is both produced by, and actively (re)produces, colonial structures of domination and control made visible through hierarchies that circumscribe the everyday lives and subjectivities of Puerto Ricans. The catastrophe of colonial debt thus amplified the island's vulnerability to natural disaster. Weakened infrastructure and a broken governmental apparatus existed well before September 17, 2017. These underlying weaknesses, caused by decades of neglect and financial precarity, directly contributed to the loss of life. For example, "uncleared roads that did not allow ambulances to arrive, lack of water distribution that led residents to contaminated water sources, lack of generators in hospitals, and more than half a year without electricity to power medical equipment, refrigerate lifesaving medications such as insulin, and provide public lighting and traffic lights to prevent deadly accidents. Lives were not lost to the wind and the rain, or even to Trump's disrespect; instead, residents drowned in bureaucracy and institutional neglect."[45]

In addition, Puerto Rico's second-class colonial status almost guaranteed an insufficient response by the United States. President Trump's breezy, performative mismanagement was, of course, widely ridiculed, but behind the image of POTUS throwing rolls of paper towels lurk more substantive, troubling truths. At least one study has shown that the US federal response was faster and more generous regarding measures of money and staffing to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma in Texas and Flor-

ida compared with Hurricane María in Puerto Rico.[46] Meanwhile, other scholars have highlighted how the subsequent humanitarian crisis revealed a long history of US colonial neglect and human rights violations in public health.[47] For these reasons, Maldonado Torres insists on the language of catastrophe (over crisis or disaster), in order to name Hurricane María's entanglements with other catastrophes of the modern Caribbean: "the story of Puerto Rico cannot be told without reference to Western modern catastrophe and coloniality. Hurricane María was a catastrophic event that, among other things, exposed the vulgarity of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States."[48]

The aftermath of the hurricane has, by now, been widely documented and discussed. Most experts agree that the total number of fatalities approximate 4,645—as opposed to August 2018's official death count of 64, which was later raised to 1,427 and then to 2,975.[49] The humanitarian organization Mercy Corps estimates that the hurricane caused as much as $94.4 billion in damages, wiping out 80% of the island's crops—an $780 million loss in agricultural yields. Against the backdrop of catastrophic loss and imperial blundering and mismanagement, Salas Rivera's poetry invites readers to visualize the varying responses to trauma through a bilingual engagement that reveals and challenges persistent hierarchies of power.

From the title of the book itself, Salas Rivera asks us to consider geography as a hierarchy named through the use of prepositions. The title's dependent clause, "under the bed is another country," refers, of course, to Puerto Rico's geographical location in relation to the United States—literally, beneath or below the mainland, a subordinate position reinforced in the material differences between the two and circulated metaphorically and figuratively through cultural texts and discourse that diminish, other, and subjugate Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. "They" refers to the United States, whose citizens occupy the unnamed "above" position. In referring to what lies beneath, under the bed, the title plays on the common childhood fear of monsters who lie in wait under the bed. It also echoes the English idiomatic expression, "you've made your bed, now lie in it." However, in Salas Rivera's re-telling, the monster beneath the bed is, in fact, the United States—or, at least, a monster created by the United States—and the culpability he demands from the US is not simply the passive act of laying down in the mess it has created. Instead, what Salas Rivera's work calls for is a more radical upending of hierarchy—a decolonial act of resistance.

The geographical relationships named through preposition are reinforced linguistically and textually on the page. The English text is positioned on the top of the page while the Spanish text is relegated to the bottom, via the footnote convention (Illustration 3). The page's visual grammar is meant to underscore disparities—in power, status, material conditions, and even in language itself. The fragmented texts, in gen-

a whole ocean[23]

[23]*la playa está totalmente destruída*

Illustration 3: Geographical relationships and disparaties are mapped onto the page in *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)*.
From Raquel Salas Rivera, *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (Birds LLC, 2019). Used by permission from the publisher.

eral, diffract another set of prepositional relationships—insider vs. outsider. The texts in English are taken from media sources and echo the language of government and bureaucracy, as well as the tourist gaze and perspectives of those witnessing the catastrophe from the US mainland. Examples include: "he threw paper towels into the crowds as a humanitarian gesture;" "there have been nine reported suicides since the hurricane;" "the airlines won't fly out food / there is no profit;" "fema box contains: / one can of beans / one packet of cookies / one oatmeal bar / a small ricebox;" "I can't even begin to imagine / what you are going through;" "loan as in / debt relief;"

"relief / as debt;" "public schools are not ready to open / we must first make sure they are up / to pre-hurricane standards;" "a drain on our economy;" "they wear their army uniforms with pride // and always swipe right;" "in puerto rico for four weeks / looking for a good time."[50] Although not always, the majority of these English-language fragments evoke bureaucratic callousness, phatic speech acts lacking real substance, and the general disembodied distance of reportage.

Against these discursive and tonal registers, Salas Rivera juxtaposes Spanish language fragments that bear witness to the perspectives of insiders. These fragments are colloquial and informal, but also speak to acts of witnessing and trauma. Examples include: "se me está partiendo el corazón" (my heart is breaking); "no paro de llorar" (I don't stop crying); "esto es como the walking dead" (this is like the walking dead); "las filas son interminables" (the lines are endless); "no existe un mundo posh-uracán" (a post-hurricane world doesn't exist); "finalmente tengo señal" (finally I have service); "acá no tenemos tiempo para el dolor—estamos ocupados sobrerviviendo" (we don't have time for pain here / we are busy surviving); "¿de qué vale tener seguro medico si no tiene luz el hospital?" (what's the point of health insurance if the hospital doesn't have lights?); "cesaron los ayudantías" (they've stopped the aid); "me dio el ptsd" (it gave me PTSD)."[51] The Spanish fragments betray a palatable intimacy and grief in their quiet observations and reactions to the material conditions unfolding around them. Against the dehumanizing and othering mainland gaze, these island fragments assert a shared—if maimed—humanity in the face of catastrophe.

Fragment and fragmentation characterize the book's larger structure and offer an additional prepositional poetics. The book is essentially a collection of fragments that have been collaged together. Alongside pieces of different discourse and fragments of two languages, we find drawings interspersed and longer prose pieces that disrupt the collection's central note/footnote motif. By playing with the idea of pieces and fragments, Salas Rivera works through ideas of ruin and detritus, both as material aftermath of the hurricane and also as stylistic motif. Ruins, fragments, and detritus are all pieces of a whole; they are defined in relation to another thing typically through the prepositions of/from (fragments of clothing, detritus from the wreck, etc.). In figurative language, we identify a part substituted for a whole through the literary device of synecdoche. The book's synecdochical poetics ask readers to consider the relationship of the island or territory (piece) to mainland (whole) as ruined fragment, on the one hand, and as a potential site for a reconstituted wholeness, on the other. Yet, ultimately, the future Puerto Rico that the poem demands is not just a recuperated piece of mainland USA, it is more metonymic than synecdochical—Salas Rivera's decolonizing urgency envisions "another country": sovereign, whole, and free.

In the space between power and powerlessness, English and Spanish, mainland

and territory, fragment and whole, Sala Rivera's white space invites us to ask what can and cannot be crossed. Is this white space the space of diaspora for the estimated 200,000 Puerto Ricans who have left the island since the hurricane? In this supposed "empty" space, perhaps we are meant to encounter the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. Thinking back to Aracelis Girmay's poetics of crossing and submersion, what submerged bodies, subjectivities, histories, and forms might we locate through the diffraction?

Conclusion: Toward a Countercatastrophic Poetics

By making visible the links between coloniality and crisis, Aracelis Girmay and Salas Rivera's catastrophic, prepositional poetics enacts what Maldonado Torres calls "countercatastrophic" thought and praxis: "Countercatastrophic thought and creative work seek to reveal the various layers of catastrophe and show their entanglement . . . Decolonial thinking requires countercatastrophic explorations of time and the formations of space, within, against, and outside the modern/colonial world. It also entails the investigation of the various forms of subjectivity, subjection, and liberation that have taken place under the catastrophe of modernity/coloniality."[52] This is precisely the oppositional and decolonial opportunities these poetic texts offer, through their content and their form. Through form, Girmay's and Salas Rivera's poetry draw readers into multiple levels of engagement (textual, visual, metaphorical), exposing and re-organizing the structures of power that give rise to conditions of vulnerability. In an interview, Girmay has commented on the link between innovative form and dismantling of power: "I wonder what new explorations of form might have to do with documenting the new and old ways of thinking about power … Perhaps the so-called hybrid poems are about dislocating or splintering the central lens."[53] In "dislocating or splintering" coloniality's "central lens," *The Black Maria* and *while they sleep* model the kind of decolonial thinking Maldonado Torres calls countercatastrophic. And by turning vulnerability into an active site of resistance through poetic form and the act of poetic engagement, Girmay and Salas Rivera model decolonial, countercatastrophic praxis. If, as Casa-Cortés asserts, "precarity brings a profound awareness of shared vulnerability …, those experiences are, in turn, deeply ambivalent, leading to a reinvigorated politicization of precarity itself and a desire to 'think in common' in the midst of fragmentation,"[54] then the potential to find solidarity in the midst of fragmentation is a truly radical act of resistance. By exposing a shared vulnerability inextricably linked to the origins of the modern/colonial world and heightened by the devastating legacies of the system of power that play out in our current environmental and geopolitical catastrophes, poetry offers a visual grammar of resistance— language with which we can simultaneously grieve and hope.

Notes

1 See Jennifer A. Reimer, "Precarity & the Practice of Chicano/a Poetry: Javier Huerta's *American Copia*," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 45, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1525/azt.2020.45.1.109; Jennifer A. Reimer, "Tarfia Faizullah's Poetics of Testimony and Transnational Feminist Praxis," *AmLit: American Literatures* 1, no. 1 (2021), DOI: 10.25364/27.1:2021.1.3; Stefan Maneval and Jennifer A. Reimer, ed., *Forms of Migration: Global Perspectives on Im/migrant Art & Literature* (Berlin: Falschrum, 2022); Silvia Schultermandl, Katharina Gerund, and Anja Mrak, "The Affective Aesthetics of Transnational Feminism," *WiN: The EAAS Women's Network Journal*, no. 1 (2018).

2 Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics," *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009): ii, DOI: 10.11156/aibr.040303e.

3 Muñoz describes these affective modes as historically specific modes of racial performativity that include depression positions, anxiety, fear, paranoia, and impermanence. José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 3 (2006): 687, DOI: 10.1086/499080.

4 Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, ed., *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

5 Maribel Casas-Cortés, "Precarious Writings: Reckoning the Absences and Reclaiming the Legacies in the Current Poetics/Politics of Precarity," *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 5 (2021): 519, 522, DOI: 10.1086/716721.

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7 See Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); Ilka Kressner, Ana María Mutis, and Elizabeth Pettinaroli, ed., *Ecofictions, Ecorealities, and Slow Violence in Latin America and the Latinx World* (London: Routledge, 2019); Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development: Critical Engagements in Feminist Theory and Practice*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

8 Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xvii.

9 Jan Wilkins and Alvine R. C. Datchoua-Trivaudey, "Researching Climate Justice: A Decolonial Approach to Global Climate Governance," *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (2022): 126, DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiab209.

10 See Philip J. Deloria, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Mark Neil Trahant, Lorent Frank Ghiglione, Douglas L. Medin, and Ned Blackhawk, ed., "Unfolding Futures: Indigenous Ways of Knowing for the Twenty-First Century," spec. issue of *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 147, no. 2 (2018); Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2020); Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to*

Standing Rock (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

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14 Rebecca Hersher, "Climate Change Was The Engine That Powered Hurricane Maria's Devastating Rains," *NPR*, April 17, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/04/17/714098828/climate-change-was-the-engine-that-powered-hurricane-marias-devastating-rains.

15 Hersher, "Climate Change."

16 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 394, 386.

17 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 387.

18 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 388.

19 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 389–90.

20 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 392.

21 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 395.

22 Brian Russell Roberts, *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), loc. 458, loc. 629.

23 Roberts, *Borderwaters*, loc. 997.

24 Archipelago was, according to Roberts, first used to name the island-studded Aegean Sea and subsequently invoked metaphorically to describe other island chains and island-filled seas.

25 Roberts, *Borderwaters*, loc. 1104.

26 I have summarized this debate at length elsewhere, most recently in Reimer, "Precarity & the Practice of Chicano/a Poetry."

27 This is, of course, an oversimplification of a cohort and canon of diverse and complex scholarship. The point here is not necessarily to reproduce in this limited article space the distinct but complimentary arguments made by Hunt, Moten, Mackey, and others but rather to signal the larger theoretical conversations and communities this works positions itself.

28 See Barbara Jane Reyes, "Interview with Barbara Jane Reyes," interview by Craig Santos

Perez, *Jacket* 2, May 10, 2011, https://jacket2.org/commentary/talking-barbara-jane-reyes; Timothy Yu, "Asian American Poetry in the First Decade of the 2000s," *Contemporary Literature* 52, no. 4 (2011), DOI: 10.1353/cli.2011.0040; Craig Santos Perez, *Navigating Chamoru Poetry: Indigeneity, Aesthetics, and Decolonization* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022).

29 J. Michael Martinez, interview by Craig Santos Perez, *Jacket* 2, June 14, 2011, https://jacket2.org/commentary/talking-j-michael-martinez-about-his-new-book-%E2%80%98heredities%E280%99.

30 In the Notes section of the book, Girmay explains that the title for this series takes part of its inspiration from the sound "elelelele," "ululatory sounds" people in Eritrea (and elsewhere) make. "Elelegy," she says, "means to place itself in both the English elegiac tradition and the ululatory traditions of grieving and joy in cultures of North and East Africa." Aracelis Girmay, *The Black Maria* (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2016), 108. The yoking of North African and Western forms comprises another layer of the work's transnational layering.

31 Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 10.

32 Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 13.

33 Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 40.

34 Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 40.

35 In the text, "Luam" is a composite figure drawn from several different female characters, historical and contemporary, quasi-factual and purely fictional, who share backgrounds of displacement and migration. It also names a fish and, in Tigrinya, means "peaceful" and "restful." Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 11.

36 Girmay, *The Black Maria*, 40.

37 Elizabeth DeLoughery and Tatiana Flores, "Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art," *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2020): 138, DOI: 10.1215/22011919-8142242.

38 DeLoughery and Flores, "Submerged Bodies," 142.

39 DeLoughery and Flores, "Submerged Bodies," 141.

40 A condition of this same act also requires goods shipped between points in the United States to be carried by vessels built, owned, and operated by Americans. This restriction initially contributed to the hold-up in getting relief and aid to Puerto Rico in the wake of the hurricane, although it was later temporarily suspended by President Trump in order to facilitate the arrival of necessary aid. Niraj Chokshi, "Trump Waives Jones Act for Puerto Rico, Easing Hurricane Aid Shipments," *New York Times*, September 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/us/jones-act-waived.html.

41 Rose Christoforo-Mitchell, "The Heritage and Culture of Puerto Ricans," Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, February 6, 1991, https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1991/2/91.02.06.x.html.

42 For a thorough accounting of neoliberal coloniality in a Puerto Rican context, see Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). Zambrana's introduction begins with an epigraph from Salas Rivera's *lo tercerio / the tertiary* (2018).

43 The entire extent of the Puerto Rican debt crisis is longer and more complex. For a

breakdown, see Laura Sullivan, "How Puerto Rico's Debt Created a Perfect Storm Before the Storm," *NPR*, May 2, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/05/02/607032585/how-puerto-ricos-debt-created-a-perfect-storm-before-the-storm.

44 Zambrana, *Colonial Debts*, 10–11.

45 Yarimar Bonilla and Marison LeBrón, "Introduction: Aftershocks of Disaster," in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 16–17.

46 Charley E. Willison, Phillip M. Singer, Melissa S. Creary, and Scott L. Greer, "Quantifying Inequities in US Federal Response to Hurricane Disaster in Texas and Florida Compared with Puerto Rico," *BMJ Global Health* 4, no. 1 (2019), DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2018-001191.

47 Samantha Rivera Joseph, Caroline Voyles, Kimberly D. Williams, Erica Smith, and Mariana Chilton, "Colonial Neglect and the Right to Health in Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 10 (2020), DOI: 10.2105/ajph.2020.305814.

48 Maldonado-Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 392.

49 Zambrana, *Colonial Debts*, 7.

50 Raquel Salas Rivera, *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (Minneapolis: Birds LLC, 2019). Salas Rivera's text does not have page numbers.

51 Salas Rivera, *while they sleep*. Salas Rivera does not offer translations in the text. All translations from Spanish by Jennifer A. Reimer.

52 Maldonado Torres, "Critique and Decoloniality," 395.

53 "Interview with Aracelis Girmay," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/aracelis-girmay.

54 Casas-Cortés, "Precarious Writings," 522.

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Performing Vulnerability and Resistance in Spoken Word Poetry

Kosal Khiev, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, and Martina Pfeiler

Abstract

This article explores the duality of Kosal Khiev's poetry performances as performing vulnerability and resistance within global cultural contexts. While his live performances vocalize several forms of systemic racism that he experienced as a refugee, in the US foster care system and with the US prison-industrial complex, his live-streamed performances reach beyond national borders that have jeopardized his very existence. Over the past few years, his livestreams and social media posts have most succinctly served as creative channels through which Kosal Khiev addresses his vulnerability. His poetry included in this article not only acknowledges and comments on his vulnerability as interconnected with US politics but also writes himself back into the national discourse from the perspective of an exiled poet.

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Kosal Khiev, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, and Martina Pfeiler

This article explores the duality of Kosal Khiev's poetry performances as performing vulnerability and resistance within global cultural contexts. While his live performances vocalize several forms of systemic racism that he experienced as a refugee, in the US foster care system and in the US prison-industrial complex, his live-streamed performances reach beyond national borders that have jeopardized his very existence. Over the past few years, his livestreams and social media posts have most succinctly served as creative channels through which Kosal Khiev thematizes vulnerability as "an embodied performance that encodes . . . multiple dislocations" while registering and commenting on US politics from afar and writing himself back into the national discourse from the perspective of an exiled poet.[1]

Kosal Khiev was born at the Khao-I-Dang Holding Center, a Cambodian refugee camp in Eastern Thailand in 1980. A year later, his family fled to the United States as survivors of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. His biographical details chronicle multiple vulnerabilities connected to genocide, racism, and the jeopardy of US immigration laws. Raised by a single mother and several older half-siblings in Santa Ana, California, as a young teenager, Kosal Khiev was physically abused and exploited at The New Bethany Home for Girls and Boys in Louisiana. After his return to Los Angeles, at the age of sixteen, he was involved in a gang fight and subsequently went to prison for fourteen years for attempted murder. Upon his release, he spent a year in a detention camp and was deported to Cambodia in 2011, where he managed to establish himself as an internationally renowned spoken word artist, receiving notoriety through accomplishments such as winning the "Best Performance" award for his short film *Why I Write* at the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin, representing Cambodia at the London Cultural Olympiad in 2012, and being featured in the award-winning documentary *Cambodian Son*, which was screened internationally and in numerous locations in the United States.

Raising the question as to how Khiev's poetry speaks to the complexities of his life as well as the perceived and systemic vulnerabilities he was exposed to, in her article "Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces" (2015), Y-Dang Troeung sums up Khiev's situation: "Incarceration and subsequent deportation has amounted to a legal double jeopardy."[2] Hence, Kosal Khiev's spoken word poetry evokes a range of questions connected to the US prison system, thereby also bringing to mind Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindess* (2010), which came out the same year that Kosal Khiev was sent to a deportation facility. The following quote describes some of the profound social implications that thus call for the urgency of establishing a new system of intersectional mindfulness and empathy in the US and replacing a system of white supremacy:

> If the movement that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being—of every class, race, and nationality, —within our nation's borders (including poor whites, who are often pitied against poor people of color), the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge . . .[3]

In this light, contextualizing Khiev's work serves as a crucial lens through which his vocalizations of vulnerability in an age of systemic racism can be confronted. Three of Khiev's spoken word poems, titled "God's Nightmare of Me," "Love borne," and "Walk with me," are printed below. "God's Nightmare of Me" belongs to the "lost poems from Folsom level 4 c-yard," rediscovered by Khiev's friend and mentor, Robert Albee. In this poem, the speaker constructs the image of a sleeping God, who is perceived to be having a nightmare of the speaker. Khiev paints striking images of a semi-conscious, yet widely awake, lyric self. The poem alerts its listeners to the speaker's vulnerable status that is inextricably intertwined with social determinism, if not internalized racism:

> My thoughts were
> conceived in the
> womb, born with the
> concept of my
> doom.

Relayed in internal rhyme, the rhythmic flow of the spoken word poem offers an implicit critique of the American Dream by exposing and challenging one of the United States' most persistent myths, when the speaker states: "Happiness eludes my clutch, so I bust back at life." Rather than becoming a victim of his circumstances, however, Khiev's lyric reflection of the speaker is *on par* with a sleeping God, wondering if the superior role of the United States and the national myth of the pursuit of

happiness is inextricably intertwined with his nightmarish situation.

In his poetry, Khiev creates his personal agenda of self-empowerment to overcome his personal conflicts, fears, and dangers that arise from his social vulnerabilities. As Kosal Khiev states, at the time he was writing the poem, he was in solitary confinement for about one and a half years, which he perceived as "being in a prison within a prison."[4] In this confined space, he was forced to reflect on his own life, arriving at a more innocent version of himself as a young child that changed after he came to the US, where, rather than experiencing a version of the American Dream, he became involved in gang culture and violence on a daily basis. While growing up, as well as through his years of imprisonment, he was exposed to a culture of systemic racism, to which refugees and immigrants are frequently subjected after their relocation to the US. In fact, the Cambodian population in the Unites States has shrunk immensely since 2001, due to the Homeland Security Act that followed the 9/11 attacks and as the result of an agreement between the US and Cambodia, which facilitates the deportation of Cambodians who were imprisoned in the United States.[5] Edward J. W. Park and John S. W. Park discuss this issue in more detail in their book, *Probationary Americans: Contemporary Immigration Policies and the Shaping of Asian American Communities* (2005), criticizing that "a few thousand persons facing final orders of deportation were refugees who fled Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia as children—some as young as one year old—to be sent 'back' to nations of which they have no memory."[6] In this context, Kosal Khiev's poetry becomes even more significant, as it not only reveals issues of vulnerability as a victim within one's social environment, but the same environment also claims that the individual nonetheless has the power to determine one's own future and way of life and can therefore overcome difficult–if even impossible–circumstances in the process.

"Love borne" opens with the line "I was conceived," which, in the passive form, indicates that being born is not something we can influence. The subsequent images construct an infant human in their most vulnerable state. This young child is even more fragile, as it is "too weak / malnourished from / the hunger." Yet, he survives, only to be brought up in an oppressive system, after relocating to the United States, which ultimately presented itself to him as a far cry from the land of freedom and opportunity. However, instead of being broken by these circumstances, the final image portrayed to us is that of a bonsai tree, which was supposed to grow in a certain direction and only to a limited height–defying the circumstances and literally outgrowing itself:

> I was born crazy with
> a destiny that
> refused to lay lazy
> So the state raised

me like bonsai
trees wrapped in
steel wire with
shackles on my feet.

In this poem, the speaker relays the various challenges he had to face, including multiple constraining environments that he eventually outgrows. The poem connects Kosal Khiev more directly to Cambodia, dealing with his early beginnings at a refugee camp at the Thai Cambodian border in 1980, fleeing the genocide of the Khmer Rouge. The Indochina Wars, especially the Vietnam War and the US interventions in Southeast Asia, led to one of the most massive flows of refugees since World War II, uprooting millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians.

More recently, an increasing number of Southeast Asian refugee authors in the United States have started writing about their memories and experiences of having to flee their home countries and living as former refugees in America. One of the many aspects that their narratives have in common is that they all hint at the vulnerability and resilience of refugees while at the same time reimagining concepts such as "home" and "identity" within a US and global context. Authors such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Bryan Thao Worra, and Krysada Panusith Phounsiri offer substantial counternarratives to the otherwise dominant American perspective on the Second Indochina War and its aftermath, "enriching the discourse about war, genocide, displacement, and reconstitution."[7] In this context, representation is crucial, as the question of vulnerability is connected to having (or, rather, not having) agency. Thus, telling their stories from their perspectives is a form of empowerment, as these authors write themselves and their versions of war experiences and their vulnerabilities into existence.

In this respect, the final poem under discussion here, titled "Walk with me," opens with an invitation to the reader to join the lyric persona on a walk. The first lines, "from the fields to the hills / where the pastures /ever greener," create a pastoral atmosphere that is suddenly disrupted when the narrator starts to speak about the killing fields. The poem addresses the beauty of Cambodia, which is often overshadowed by the dark history of this country. Like many of Khiev's poems, it is extremely powerful, yet painful at the same time. The speaker recalls an unspeakable memory of a father who was forced to kill his own daughter and thereby turns metaphorically into a zombie himself, bringing to mind how human beings are often labeled as "monsters" without ever looking at the roots of their behavior or without even taking their vulnerabilities into account. The poem is not only about trauma but also about coping with trauma. As Khiev suggests, moving forward in Cambodia means that "the older generation needs that forgiveness of the younger generation."[8] The poem hints at the many (forgotten) memories and stories of Cambodians who have suf-

fered from the Cambodian Civil War and the Pol Pot regime. This raises the questions of what role the poets may play and what kind of an impact they may have on their audiences (as well as what kind of audience) when it comes to questions of forgetting and remembering.

In a world of global flows and "ethnoscapes,"[9] and their painful limitations, Kosal Khiev's digital appearances via livestreams create new forms of "writing/streaming" back "home," particularly when dealing with his post-traumatic stress and trying to cope with everyday struggles in Cambodia as an internally displaced refugee, deportee, and former prisoner. As Judith Butler puts it in "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" (2016): "Media can function as part of 'infrastructural support' when it facilitates modes of solidarity and establishes new spatio-temporal dimensions of the public including not only those who can appear within the visual images of the public, but those who are, through coercion, fear, or necessity, living outside the reach of the visual frame."[10]

Depicted by the media and producing narratives from a "Western" perspective, refugees are continually rendered as distressing figures without agency, who have to flee from non-democratic governments, suggesting that their tragic fate will not befall "Westerners," while completely ignoring the role of the West in the postcolonial history of many Southeast Asian countries. This observation feeds into the notion that the West still claims a certain superior, powerful, and certainly less vulnerable position (except when, ostensibly, being "flooded" with waves of refugees while so many of them drown in actual waves in their desperate and vulnerable attempts to reach the coast lines and shores). This viewpoint has most recently been called into question, as millions of refugees from the Ukraine flee the Russian invasion. Kosal Khiev's poetry not only calls supposed given power relations into question, but he shares his volatile experiences as a refugee, displaced person, twice deprived of his home country, showing not only how vulnerability can be turned into speaking out against social injustice and creating counternarratives, but also how it can turn into social empowerment and, ultimately, exude extreme strength.

***

God's Nightmare of Me/Greyblue

Greyblue
Lost in my reverie, I
find myself wading
through the deep
end of the ocean.
Floating face up,

hoping God wakes
up!
Because of this nightmare, He's
dreaming of me.
Have me swimming
with the fishes in the
murky sea,
deeply affected!
My empty carcass, stripped, gutted and
heartless, remains
partly alive.
pleading to who
cares,
while waiting for a reply from the
barren air.
Revive what is dead,
love is only asleep in
its dungeon bed.
Release my soul
from its chambers.
I've lived in danger,
been hurted and
deserted, so I let go
in anger.
My thoughts were
conceived in the
womb, born with the
concept of my
doom.
To live in agony, to
survive all tragedies.
Nothing can
compare or prepare
me on what has
happened to me.
Happiness eludes
my clutch, so I bust
back at life.
But is it enough to
erase such a deep
pain?
can I attain love
again?
The questions

bombards my mind,
with an answer so
hard to find,
because in my mind
I'm a sleep walking
talking humanoid
with a conscious to
suffer,
inflicted with the
disease to love you.
I'm consumed with
rage to do battle
with my faceless
demons
when they escape
from their cages.
Flip the pages of my
unseen revelations!
I'm pre-ordained a
sinner,
who has yet to figure
the meaning of my
existence.
Who listens when I
talk?
Who answers when I
question?
Hoping I can get lost
into your seduction,
seduced by how
your body functions.
So let me begin by
letting my spirit
descend.
When it was pure
and not obscure or
tainted by the world.
I'm sure this is God's
nightmare;
to dream up this
love affair,
then tear me away from those I care.
Stare at my life!
Study my odyssey!

See all the ghosts
that haunt me, and
all the evil thoughts
that bothers me.
Take a shot at me
and examine my exit
wounds,
while the fumes of
blood hangs thick in
the air,
let me share with
you my dreams, bare
you my soul!
Help me bury my
past and give me a
future to hold.
It all unfolds now!
The power to be free
and fly!

Love borne

I was conceived
between the tree
trunks of my
mothers knees.
I imagined she
screamed our
peace with a belly
swollen holding on
to me.
See back then I was
just a seed.
Thoughts have yet to
formulate
I was too weak.
Malnourished from
the hunger
I felt her hunger
speak
But she couldn't
weep yesterday's
sorrows cause
tomorrow's were full

of woes.
So the story goes..
My father came back
from the dead,
But I was hidden.
Forbidden from his
keep,
I was the youngest
brother of 7.
Born in The
eighties.
A refugee camp
baby.
I was born crazy with
a destiny that
refused to lay lazy.
So the state raised
me like bonsai
trees wrapped in
steel wire with
shackles on my feet.
That day it rained
sheets of ice snow.
I remembered
clearly how I
shivered
It was so ice cold.
And there, I heard
for the first time
I heard the beast
breathing.
And like spoils of
war we was offered.
Into the land of
fathers with no
fathers.
Fatherless sons who
got lost within these
deep waters.
Clearly we were boys
playing to be men.
In pursuit to be
warriors bathed in
sin.

We were boys taught
by boys claiming to
be men.
So my rights of
passage came
through the devils
den.
But I was destined not
to die
So what didn't kill
me
Made me stronger in
my eyes.
You see, I was
loveborne
Conceived between
the #treetrunks of
my mothers knees.
And as I grew like
bonsai trees
wrapped in steel
wire.
I grew and broke
free
And rose even
higher.

Walk with me...

From the fields to the
hills
Where the pastures
ever greener.
Them killing fields
was real
With a slave posture,
and demeanor.
All black everything.
So you know,
we all looking similar.
Red sash for a blood
bath.
It was all familiar.
And you can almost

hear her.
Inaudible,
due to bombs
dropped
encroaching ever
nearer.
Very possible,
she pleaded for her
life.
But that scythe cut her
down
like she was made
out of rice.
Kill her or be killed.
He was told twice.
So when that blade
made way,
And fear took hold.
His eyes turned
opaque,
As his fear went bold.
Rage aimed at Self
hatred,
for he was too scared
to say.
I would rather die,
but it was all too late..
So he said goodbye
to his shadow,
And zombied off into
battle.
His appetite was
ravenous,
With the gait of a
scavenger.
Came across a ravine,
Full of downstream
passengers.
Felt like a dream
if not, for that scream
filled laughter.
And in between, came
piercing.
A cry for a, happily

ever after.
It was a scene of
serene peace.
Far from this
maniacal chapter.
But as pages turn
years roll.
Sages burned into
cursed scrolls.
He grew old with an
opaque soul.
With eyes oblique,
brimming with tears,
That never unfroze.
Accompanied by a
million ghosts.
All speaking in a
silent code.
Asking how does life
goes
We've been waiting to
be floated upstream.
Down that dream you
thought once saw.
Syllables you caught,
and once heard.
The wind had
whispered.
Free her.
Let her go.
So she can return
home
And be at peace..
And you can finally
sleep.
Cause them haunting
memories is
daunting.
He can forever see
the gauntlet.
Covered in blood of
the slaughtered.
Worst,
he can never escape,

the face of his
daughter.
Bubbling out,
From
underneath that
Water.
Daddy I love you!
I forgive you.
It wasn't your fault.
You was never meant
to falter.
But evil men came
with fiery flames,
And their bodies
became your alter.
You sacrificed your
life thinking to be a
martyr.
Instead, you became
one of the walking
dead,
With nothing left to
offer.
So here's my offering
Your offspring
Here to reclaim your
honor

Your honor,
Pardon me,
for my artistry.
But this picture makes
it hard to speak.
The framework of this
hurt,
Makes it hard to
reach.
Those that are so far
out of reach.
Out of speech.
I beseech!
Out of peace.

How do we begin to
live
How do we forgive
Time has been calling
me
To be linear.
The minute, and
minuscule
The micro that
expands beyond the
physical,
digital age of
informational
sage,
being burn
to awaken our human
spiritual molecule.
This is the miracle.
Individual experiences
laid bare,
Where moments
becomes critical
Shift the spectrum.
The other end is
meaningful.
Full of dreams,
And I'm catching
every syllable.
Can you see the
invisible?
Visual so vivid.
Feels like it's video
scripted.
But this life,
depicted image
Is the way we live it.
So livid,
red hot from all the
friction.
Strategically divided.
Then left a remainder
after division.
Each boxed in, and
replicated.

Each locked in, and
heavily medicated.
Speech at a toxin
level
of lividity.
Spinning deities with envy.
Plenty you see in the
frenzy.
Mad feelings,
They be telling me.
Drink up! Before your
cup is empty.
So here's a toast.
To those making the
most out of nothing.
To Those living with
ghosts,
I feel you.
I feel em too.
It's haunting.
So salute,
Here's a promise.
If it means, her life, or
mine
This time around,
It's death before
dishonor...

Acknowledgments

In our joint panel discussion at the 47th conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies (AAAS) and within the context of vulnerability and American studies, we engaged with the spoken word poetry of Kosal Khiev, an exiled Khmer-American poet, refugee, and survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime and the US prison system. Thanks to the generous invitation of the conference organizers, this framework created an opportunity to listen to, and reflect on, Kosal Khiev's poems as he performed them via a livestream. Thereby, the American studies scholars were able to grapple with the concept of vulnerability as a lived experience and creative resource. Furthermore, by including Kosal Khiev's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of a global health crisis, a range of postcolonial perspectives, as vocalized from the position of a vulnerable subject, were brought to the fore.

"God's Nightmare of Me" is one of my lost poems from Folsom level 4 c-yard, recently found by my friend and mentor Robert Albee. Thank u brother! Somehow, these words still ring true. Gave me goose bumps when I re-read these words out loud.

Notes

1 Y-Dang Troeung, "Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces: Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and Kosal Khiev's *Why I Write*," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no. 2 (2015): 108, DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlv011.

2 Troeung, "Iterations of War," 109.

3 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 18–19.

4 Kosal Khiev, interview by Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt and Martina Pfeiler, February 17, 2022.

5 Hai B. Pho, "Lowell, Politics, and the Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants 1975–2000," in *Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants in the Mill City: Changing Families, Communities, Institutions—Thirty Years Afterward*, ed. Tuyet-Lan Pho, Jeffrey N. Gerson, and Sylvia R. Cowan (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2008).

6 Edward J. W. Park and John S. W. Park, *Probationary Americans. Contemporary Immigration Policies and the Shaping of Asian American Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

7 Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadow: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.

8 Kosal Khiev, interview by Laemmerhirt and Pfeiler.

9 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, nos. 2–3 (1990): 296, DOI: 10.1177/026327690007002017.

10 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability and Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

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Kosal Khiev is a spoken word and tattoo artist.

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Martina Pfeiler received her *venia legendi* in American Literature and Cultural Studies at TU Dortmund with a habilitation thesis titled "Ahab in Love: The Creative Reception of Moby-Dick in Popular Culture." She is currently a senior researcher at the University of Vienna (ERC/FWF Poetry Off the Page). Previously, she taught as Interim Commissionary Chair of American Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, as Assistant Professor of American Studies at TU Dortmund, as Visiting Lecturer at Radboud University and Oglethorpe University. She is the

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Ongoing Research in Austrian American Studies

One Nation Under Many Cowboy Hats

Western Hats and American Studies—A Cultural-Historical Conspectus

Stefan Rabitsch

Abstract

Commencing with the polemic that "everybody has always worn cowboy hats," this article (re)conceptualizes western hats as significant, signifying, wearable, and thus nomadic manifestations of Americanness. Their material complexity lends itself to thinking through the cultural fabric of Americanness, which, depending on the vantage point, oscillates between dominant and arguably homogeneous permutations of predominately white Americanness, and the checkered, multicultural "felt" that is the American experience at large, and that of the American West in particular.

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One Nation Under Many Cowboy Hats

Western Hats and American Studies—A Cultural-Historical Conspectus

Stefan Rabitsch

> Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things.
>
> Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (c.125 CE)

> The feel for the cowboy is everywhere; the symbol of the cowboy is just as pervasive.
>
> Joe B. Frantz, "Cowboy Philosophy" (1967)

> Every cowboy has to have a cowboy hat.
>
> Tulsa Hughes, *Cowboy & Indiana* (2018)

In an ad released on their Instagram channel, hat shaper Ryan McBride of The Best Hat Store in Fort Worth, Texas, proclaims that "the cowboy hat is the most recognizable piece of apparel on planet Earth."[1] The polemics and their attendant American exceptionalism aside, in singling out the western hat—an industry-specific term—and attributing such singular significance to it, he has pointed to something rather tangible that cannot easily be reduced to this headwear's particular shape, or as a hatter would say, its *silhouette*. Even though other pieces of iconic American clothing such as T-shirts, denim jeans, or pantyhose are success stories of American ingenuity, entrepreneurship, and soft cultural power, their global dissemination and mass market ubiquity have arguably diluted any immediate associations with American culture that consumers might have had in the past. Western hats, however, have retained a higher degree of recognizability as material products of the American experience. If the "feel" for the cowboy as a symbol is indeed everywhere, as Joe Frantz has diagnosed, then a cowboy's lid is the most conspicuous component in their repertoire of accoutrements. Consequently, like the lead character in *Cowboy & Indiana* (2018) puts it so succinctly, every cowboy *needs* a hat.

To be sure, western hats are inextricably entangled with the history of a quintessentially American space—the Trans-Mississippi West—and the livestock raising and horsemanship economies it has spawned. As a piece of apparel, they are intimately tied to the bodies that wear them in these contexts (and beyond). In the same vein, they have covered the heads of many a character that populate the mythos of the American West, which continues to carry considerable cultural capital within as well as outside the United States. In short, western hats are pieces of wearable Americanness that engender questions fundamental to American studies as a discipline—What and who do we mean by America? What do we mean by American studies? Deceivingly simple in their materiality, iconicity, and the associations attributed to them, western hats belie a complex cultural history that lends itself well to the practice of a holistic brand of American studies in the twenty-first century.

A small corpus of examples will gesture toward the outlines of western hats' cultural complexity and significance. Grandson of Jewish immigrants and senior advisor to former US President Trump, Stephen Miller posed for his Santa Monica High School yearbook entry in a big black felt cowboy hat. A line by "cowboy president" Theodore Roosevelt serves as the picture's caption—"There is room here for only 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are Americans and nothing else."[2] Of course, he was not the first aspiring politician to wear a cowboy hat as a jingoistic symbol for signifying who a real American is, and who isn't; Lyndon B. Johnson, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, to name but a few, all touted their western hats on purpose and with panache. Changing his mind at the last minute, President-elect Bush would have almost worn his cowboy hat at his first inauguration.[3] They all deployed a particular permutation of the American cowboy—a heteronormative, (hyper)masculine, white male who engages in and perpetuates a process of "regeneration through violence"[4]—which is one-dimensional, indeed simplistic. Even though it is partially rooted in historical realities, this type is largely the product of privileged imaginaries and excessive (re)mediation, which have left a latent impact on both historical and contemporary bodies. While these permutations of the cowboy are both entangled with and constituent of privileged, embodied performances of whiteness, they are hardly representative of the diversity found underneath the brims of western hats.

If anything, in his path-breaking work on Native American histories and cultures, historian Peter Iverson has shown that indigenous people have been cowboys, too.[5] For example, his work on the Native American rodeo circuit is garnished with photographs (historical and contemporary) that show native peoples dressed in western wear, engaging in "stereotypical" cowboy activities.[6] Rooted in anthropology and ethnohistory, Iverson has meticulously charted how those who were Othered have appropriated and continue to participate in the practices of the settler colonial oppressor in an effort to reconfigure them into means for meeting the "dilemma

of survival."[7] Specifically, "over time some items brought in from the outside may become 'traditional,'" he has argued, "but it does not matter from whence they came. What matters is how the people perceive and define them."[8] For participants in livestock raising and horsemanship economies, this includes essential accoutrements such as western hats. Even though there are not many Native Americans in the Professional Bull Riders (PBR), one of the two top roughstock circuits in the country, six of the top thirty bull riders are of indigenous descent; for example, Keyshawn Whitehorse (Diné) was named PBR Rookie of the Year in 2018.[9] The goal here is not to supplant one embodied and performed image—regardless of how distorted, inadequate, and erroneous it is—with another, but rather to practice a multiscopic way of seeing, reading, and engaging with the multicultural realities that have been a throughline in the American experience, especially out west.[10]

A similar additive impetus informs the *Eight Seconds* art project of Portland-based photographer, designer, and documentarian Ivan B. McClellan. In 2015, he entered the world of African American rodeos by accident and he has been using his camera's lens to capture and document a little-known (by the mainstream) facet of the American West ever since. African American rodeos and trail riding have their roots in the early years of roughstock sports at the turn of the twentieth century with champion athletes such as Bill Pickett having left a vibrant legacy. Recalling his first all-black rodeo in Okmulgee, Oklahoma, McClellan has emphasized that "everybody there was black, you know, there were people doing the cupid shuffle in the dirt with their boots; there were old men with perfectly starched white shirts and crisp Stetsons and pinky rings."[11] The photographs coming out of that and other rodeos have since been featured by notable western wear brands such as Wrangler, Ariat, Boot Barn, and Stetson. About the latter, he has noted that "this sort of American icon really resonates with a lot of different folks . . . and saying like hey there's more to this story than what you think and this culture belongs to a lot of people, you know."[12] Each of these instances, where we see a person of color wearing a western hat, engaging in cultural practices that have been primarily associated with white Anglo ranching culture and horsemanship, adumbrates three simple albeit far-reaching observations regarding western hats that, in turn, make them a potent object of inquiry from the vantage point of American studies.

The tautology notwithstanding, western hats have always been *i)* worn by everybody regardless of ethnicity, gender, class, or age. Since they usually go where their wearers go, western hats are material objects whose embodied mobility *ii)* calls into question a wide range of boundaries (geographic, regional, national, social, etc.). In other words, western hats are at once tangible in their materiality and yet liminal in their spatio-temporal mobility, which is wedded to affective, body-based practices. Going beyond the fibred materiality of the objects themselves, their embod-

ied mobility also extends to representational forms. Western hats have gained their potent symbolism and transnational recognizability not only on account of their wearable materiality, but also their intermedial migrations from the printed page to the digital worlds of video games; indeed, they are intermedial monads (Illustration 1). Trying to ascertain the etymological origins of the expression—"a ten gallon hat"—Peter Tamony has offered the following pleonasm: "One of the apt and incontrovertible definitions of a human being is 'one who wears a hat.'"[13] In other words, a western hat is *iii)* a visible and obvious marker of identity. In the same vein, fashion historian Ann Saunders has observed that "when you meet people, you look them in the face and your first most immediate impressions about them are received from the head and from anything that your acquaintance, new or old, may have chosen, or needed, to put upon it."[14]

Illustration 1: Donning video game hats.
Screenshot from *Red Dead Redemption 2*. *Red Dead Redemption 2* © Rockstar Games, 2018.

With their material complexity serving as a conceptual fabric, western hats and the bodies that wear them become sites of interdisciplinary, indeed intersectional, inquiry that calls for a holistic practice of American studies. A broad church since its inception, American studies has welcomed a decidedly interdisciplinary congregation which is at least in part wedded to the idea of America as an "unfinished country"[15]—a seemingly never-ending "experiment."[16] Certain strands of the discipline have given us solid toolboxes to work with powerful cultural-historical narratives that continue to have significant currency.[17] While these discursive formations have sustained domi-

nant power hierarchies, and are thus complicit in their systemic inequities, they are also key sites for critical inquiry with a view to addressing what President Kennedy repeatedly called the nation's "unfinished business."[18] The collateral effects of what has since become known as the "culture wars" of the 1990s, which continue to fuel a socio-cultural-political pendulum that swings back and forth ferociously,[19] have also trickled down into the discipline. There, they arguably have led to an increasing rejection of the historical albeit still useful bedrock of American studies in favor of more popular paradigms such as affect studies, cognitive narratology, or vulnerability studies.[20] This is not to suggest that these newer methodologies are unimportant—indeed, far from it—but some of their proponents reject and denounce earlier paradigms as problematic, outdated, and no longer pertinent; such a position promotes hyper-specialization and compartmentalization, which runs the risk of isolating an otherwise receptive discipline. American studies would do well to remember that it can ill-afford a methodological tug-of-war where it is either the one or the other in times where a rise in ahistorical thinking and a general lack of historiographic as well as media literacy have produced what is often referred to as the post-truth turn. Consequently, seemingly ordinary material objects such as western hats call forth the full interdisciplinary gamut of American studies, as their material specificity as objects requires not only engagement with their material history and their narrativized symbolism but also their affectual entanglements with the bodies that wear them and the (re)mediated representations thereof.

Locating and Defining a Distinctively American Cultural Object

Western hats have a long and varied history, ranging from their precursors in the colonial cattle economies of New Spain and their subsequent intercultural migration to US–Spanish/Mexican borderlands to them becoming practical items of everyday apparel in the livestock raising and horsemanship economies of the Trans-Mississippi West, and their global dissemination as a symbol of Americanness in the wake of American popular culture.

In order to tell the cultural history of one of the most iconic pieces of American clothing, the interdisciplinary capital of American studies becomes the handmaiden to the multidisciplinary fabric of fashion studies—dress history in particular—and vice-versa, while simultaneously leveraging the interventionist thrust of critical whiteness studies aimed at the West and recent scholarship in eco- as well as ethnohistory.[21] Emerging from the material(ity) turn, fashion studies have informed and augmented the cultural studies paradigm since the late 1990s. The study of fashion, or *dress*, which has become the more widely accepted term, straddles the dis-

courses of ethnicity, gender, age, and class as well as a Barthesian system of semiotics that conceptualizes dress as a system of historically mobile meanings.[22] Next to the object of dress itself, the study of any piece of apparel must take into consideration the bodies that wear them within contexts of culturally circumscribed practices and performances, which are situated in historically identifiable settings.[23] The versatile methodological toolbox of dress history is particularly well-suited from an American studies perspective "because of the multi-faceted 'levels' at which clothing functions within any society and any culture."[24] Starting with artifact-based approaches, which draw on museology, conservation, and curatorial expertise, dress history affords integrated methods for the study of clothing as social and economic products in literary sources, visual media, and oral histories, among others. Surprisingly, dress history has yet to fashion a comprehensive history of a piece of headwear that commands a high degree of cultural specificity and transnational recognizability such as western hats.

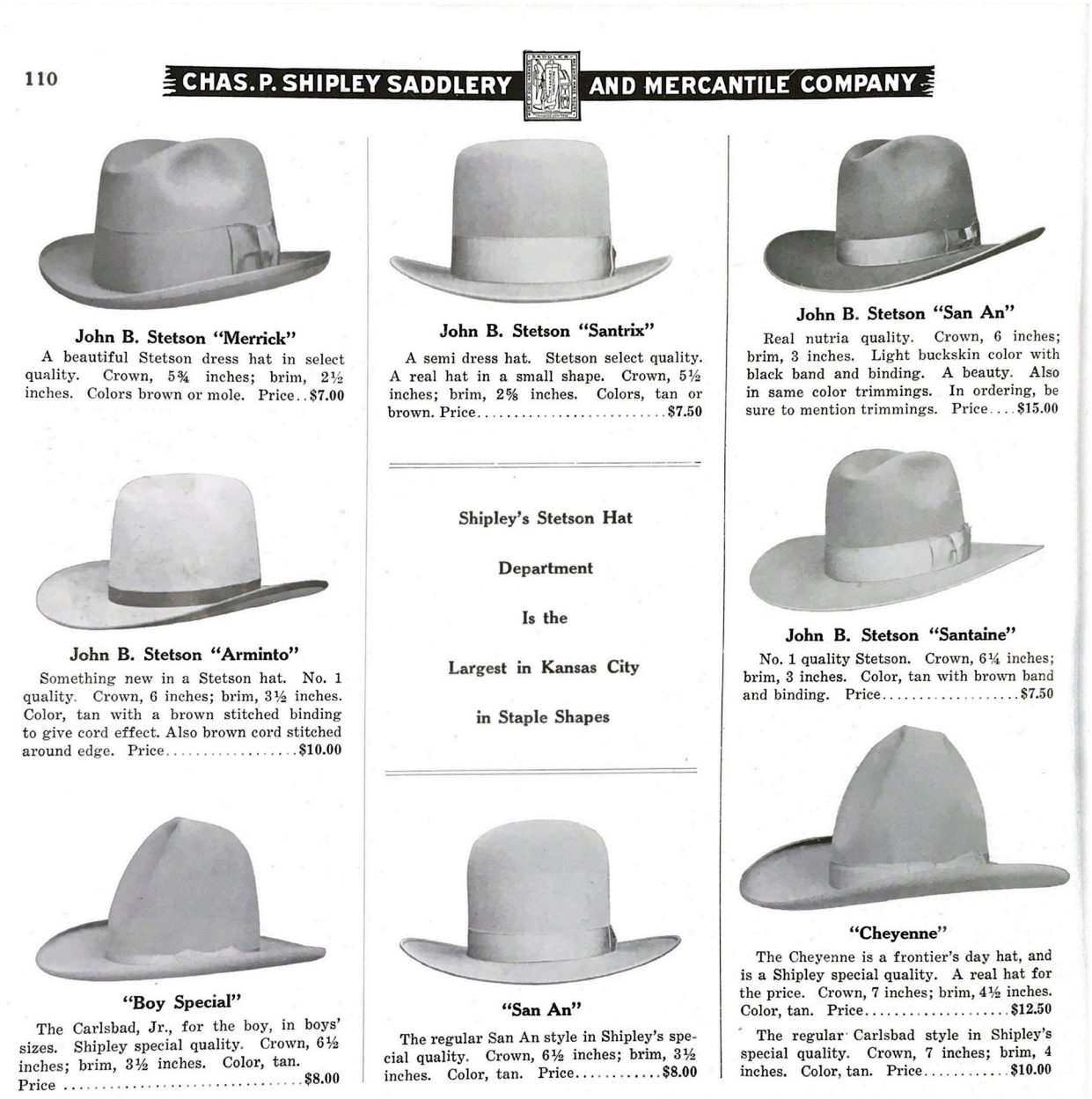
If encountered in scholarship at all, western hats have been identified as a paradigmatic item in the western genre's iconography.[25] What is more surprising is that even in comprehensive reference works dedicated to American fashion history, such as the multi-volume Greenwood *Clothing Through American History* (2008–2013) series, and in the leading journals in the field, *Dress* and *Fashion Theory*, western hats are afforded only cursory glances.[26] Their origins as practical everyday fashion items are often reductively mapped as a part of the pioneering experience. This eschews, for example, their economic significance as part of a large industry whose traditional centers were located in the Mid-Atlantic states in the late nineteenth century before moving to the Midwest, and later the Southwest in the mid-twentieth century (to say nothing of the potent ideological work they have been doing as wearable signifiers of Americanness). Such an oversight is partially rooted in a number of intersecting factors that have undergirded dress history such as the study of dress having "taken place outside the boundaries of 'academic respectability,'" a long-standing focus on women's *haute couture*, and a latent gendered imbalance that undercuts the study of menswear which, as Lou Taylor has asserted, is "all too obviously true."[27] Other pertinent publications fall into one of two categories: *i)* coffee table books dedicated to western dress and paraphernalia,[28] and *ii)* opulently illustrated catalogs such as Byron Price's authoritative *Fine Art of the West* (2004), which tackles hats only as an afterthought since leather artifacts (saddles, boots, etc.) and metalwork (bits, spurs, etc.) receive the bulk of his attention.[29] Consequently, American studies is ideally positioned to define and tell the story of a quintessentially American specimen of a cranial cover—*petasus americanus*.[30]

Colloquially often referred to as "cowboy hats," western hats are significant, signifying, wearable, and thus nomadic cultural silhouettes. Entangled with human bod-

ies, they are carriers of multilayered cultural meanings that engender instant recognition not only in the United States, but also in transnational, global contexts. Their cultural history calls for a synoptic framework whose scaffold acknowledges how we encounter their materiality.

Western hats engage most human senses. While "sight dominates many aspects of dress," dress and body studies pioneer Joanne B. Eicher has asserted, "the other four senses may also come into play …[,] making up the dressed person and presenting a sensory *gestalt*."[31] First and foremost, they are readily recognized, identified, and *seen* as a distinctive shape. Usually, they have a wide(r) brim, a relatively high crown, and they are decorated with hatbands and various small accessories (e.g., feathers, pins, and conchos). A host of creases and dents, each bearing one or more distinctive names (e.g., Cattleman, Ranch, Brick, Gus, and Horseshoe), add individual character to the crown of the hat. The same applies to the flange of the brim which may be pointed, round, or square in the front, and flat, low, or tacoed-up on the sides.[32] Taken together, these features serve in part to identify the wearer with a particular community (e.g., professional, local, or regional). Historically, particular hat styles made it possible to identify their wearers according to the ranch outfit they were riding for, or to discern whether someone came from a particular county. For example, Andy Wilkinson, artist-in-residence at Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection, recalled that until approximately the 1980s, someone who traveled the southwest wearing a steeply tacoed-up black felt hat was most likely hailing from northern New Mexico.[33] In a trade where industry norms have been largely absent, visual sources are of paramount importance for mapping the broader developments and changes in hat styles over the decades. For example, trade literature and mail order catalogues of national retailers (e.g., Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward) and especially those of smaller, regional retailers who catered specifically to ranching and farming communities (e.g., Hamley & Co., Shipley Saddlery and Mercantile, and the Denver Drygoods Company) make visible the evolution of western hats (Illustration 2).

Providing both insulation and shade in diverse environments, the materials used to manufacture western hats can also be *felt*. While felt hats are mostly made out of the downy underfur of rabbits, hares, and beavers,[34] different types of straws (e.g., sisal, toquilla, and shantung) are used for their straw counterparts. Hats' embodied mobility is prefigured in the material streams that govern their raw materials. Historically, hat-making has been a transatlantic, indeed global trade since the early colonial era. Today, beaver is still harvested in North America while the lion's share of rabbit and hare fur is imported from Belgium, Portugal, and Spain, where it is a by-product of the pet food industry. Central and South America—with Ecuador being the central node—remains the primary source for straw hat bodies. John Milano, who founded Milano hats in 1982 after having worked with Harry Rolnick, founder of Resistol, has



110 CHAS. P. SHIPLEY SADDLERY AND MERCANTILE COMPANY

John B. Stetson "Merrick"
A beautiful Stetson dress hat in select quality. Crown, 5¾ inches; brim, 2½ inches. Colors brown or mole. Price..$7.00

John B. Stetson "Santrix"
A semi dress hat. Stetson select quality. A real hat in a small shape. Crown, 5½ inches; brim, 2⅝ inches. Colors, tan or brown. Price.....$7.50

John B. Stetson "San An"
Real nutria quality. Crown, 6 inches; brim, 3 inches. Light buckskin color with black band and binding. A beauty. Also in same color trimmings. In ordering, be sure to mention trimmings. Price....$15.00

John B. Stetson "Arminto"
Something new in a Stetson hat. No. 1 quality. Crown, 6 inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan with a brown stitched binding to give cord effect. Also brown cord stitched around edge. Price.....$10.00

Shipley's Stetson Hat
Department
Is the
Largest in Kansas City
in Staple Shapes

John B. Stetson "Santaine"
No. 1 quality Stetson. Crown, 6¼ inches; brim, 3 inches. Color, tan with brown band and binding. Price.....$7.50

"Boy Special"
The Carlsbad, Jr., for the boy, in boys' sizes. Shipley special quality. Crown, 6½ inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan. Price $8.00

"San An"
The regular San An style in Shipley's special quality. Crown, 6½ inches; brim, 3½ inches. Color, tan. Price.....$8.00

"Cheyenne"
The Cheyenne is a frontier's day hat, and is a Shipley special quality. A real hat for the price. Crown, 7 inches; brim, 4½ inches. Color, tan. Price.....$12.50

The regular Carlsbad style in Shipley's special quality. Crown, 7 inches; brim, 4 inches. Color, tan. Price.....$10.00

Illustration 2: Perusing historical hat styles.
Scan from *Shipley Catalog No. 19* (Kansas City: Chas P. Shipley Saddlery and Mercantile Co., 1923), 10.

said that "making a hat is a black-magic business,"[35] which is echoed by contemporary western hat makers who view their trade as equal parts science and art. The production of both straw and felt hats is a time capsule; since the collapse of the men's hat market in the 1960s, which all but halted the development and manufacture of hat-making equipment on an industrial scale, the machinery used in hat-making is anywhere between sixty and one hundred years old.

Upon very close encounter, it becomes apparent that hats are also odorous; their *smell* intimately ties them to the body of the wearer and thus the different "practi-

cal" contexts in which they are worn along with socially circumscribed rules that constitute hat etiquette. What Ann Buck has termed "dress in action,"[36] Lou Taylor has contended is key for arriving at a "cultural understanding of the past [and present] through its coded signaling of gender, culture, politics and social stratum."[37] Even a casual internet search will yield a host of different (sometimes contradictory) pointers and explanations as to when and where it is acceptable to wear a hat, and when it is not. Whether an essential protective item in actual ranch life, a largely ornamental item in cultural traditions growing out of livestock raising and horsemanship economies (e.g., rodeos and horse reining), or an ideologically charged symbol for political practices, western hats can be encountered in diverse places and contexts. In a vein similar to those US presidents who are known for their "cowboy diplomacy" (e.g., Lyndon B. Johnson and Ronald Reagan), cultural diplomacy events such as the Olympics have featured western hats as part of the official attire of Team USA more than once both during and after the Cold War.[38]

The embodied mobility of western hats goes to show that their cultural history and thus their meaning(s) are as complex as the country they are usually conflated with. Drawing on actor-network theory, John Storey has posited—without denying objects their ontological materiality—that objects are by definition "mute."[39] In other words, material objects do not emanate any meaning in their own right, but rather meaning is ascribed to them. Storey has called this process the "entanglement of signification and materiality enabled by a social practice."[40] However, the way how a material object is made meaningful may be either enabled and/or constrained by its materiality. "The physicality of clothes," Lou Taylor has emphasized, translates into "central considerations within the process of design, manufacture and consumption."[41] Consequently, the materiality of western hats lends itself to thinking through paradigmatic tenets for understanding American culture at large.

Felting Fibrous Entanglements between American Studies and Dress Studies

The onus for this lamentable lack of a synoptic telling of western hats' rich history might be on fashion studies since they are, as Naomi Tarrant has opined, "contorted to fit some theory without a basic understanding of the properties of cloth and the structure of clothes."[42] Therein lies the potential for interweaving, or rather interfelting, a holistic practice of American studies with the integrated methods of dress history in order to fill not only glaring gaps in western studies and fashion studies, respectively, but also to enhance what might be considered a "local(ized)" subject area with transnational appreciation and understanding. In other words, rather than fitting a piece of clothing (in)to one or more theoretical straitjackets, it makes more

sense to fit a particular framework to the piece of clothing in question by employing its materiality as a "custom-tailored" analogical starting point.

Both western hats as a silhouette and the raw materials they are made of become a fulcrum for how we define American culture at large—and the multicultural fabric of the American West in particular—and consequently articulate those questions through the hats' materiality. This boils down to looking at concepts that we find in American studies 101 and thinking them through—at different levels of magnification—the materiality of western hats. Western hats cast a deceivingly simple and instantly recognizable silhouette. Most people are able to conjure up a mental image of their general characteristics. They usually have a wide(r), flanged brim and a relatively high, creased crown; they mostly come in colors like black, brown, white, and what hatters call "silver belly" (a mix of gray and cream). These characteristics translate into a generic approximation of a seemingly singular materiality; that is, an archetype (for the lack of a more appropriate term). It is a rather homogenized image that obscures the great variety concealed by the generic image of western hats. Of course, they have always come in many different shapes and sizes; and while the color palette was limited at the turn of the twentieth century, they come in virtually every color by now. There is a correlative to these two levels of magnification in the properties of the raw materials that these hats are made of and their production processes. In the interest of scope, fur felt will serve as the primary example.

Among the oldest fabrics known to humanity, felt is a fascinating material; it is the smoothest, strongest, and lightest non-woven fabric. Harvested from the downy underfur of certain animals, fur fibers are equipped with microscopically small barbs on their tips that start interlocking with other barbs in every direction as soon as they are mixed together; this is a result of both the "*directional fiber effect*" and the fibers' "*crimp*."[43] In successive stages, they are then repeatedly put into hot water and pounded, which causes the fibers to interconnect ever tighter as the hat body shrinks. This is how the fur cone, which forms the basis for every hat body, shrinks to approximately one third of its initial size. In more than thirty steps, the hat body is then blocked and flanged; a combination of steam, heat, and pressure is used in the process. The body is also repeatedly sanded—or "pounced," as hatters would say—until its surface is consistently smooth.[44] However, if one were to place the finished hat under a microscope, the individual fur fibers would become visible again.

The fibred materiality of western hats lends itself to reappraising claims to American exceptionalism and imagined homogeneity as well as American multiculturalism and cultural relativism through a fresh, object-specific lens. In the terms found in American studies textbooks, the generic shape of western hats—and the smoothness and uniformity of the finished felt—is compatible with the image of America

as a melting pot and its attendant assimilationist discourses. Conversely, the wide variety of western hats and the fibered materiality of felt correlates with the concept of America as a multicultural, polyvocal mosaic.[45] Two narratives, each of which has served as origin story of cowboy hats—one more popular than the other—illustrate the interfelted approach to American studies. They demonstrate that as soon as the privileged and/or dominant meanings of objects, which are often narrativized, are no longer taken for granted, the legitimacy of their power becomes vulnerable and then usually also contested.

The popular version of the cowboy hat's origin goes as follows: prior to the American Civil War, there was no cowboy hat per se; along comes John Batterson Stetson and invents it in 1865. The rest is (popular) history.[46] A native of New Jersey, Stetson had learned the hat-making trade from his father. In pursuit of frontier rejuvenation, he traveled out West to recuperate from tuberculosis in 1860. While mining for gold in Colorado, he turned a need for warm, water-repellant clothing into a business idea for making and selling blankets and wide-brimmed hats. Returning to the East a prospector-turned-entrepreneur, he took out a modest loan and began building hats with two employees.[47] He then went beyond the regional business models of his local competitors. Operating out of Philadelphia, he tapped into the great technological marvels of the age—the rail road and the telegraph—and began to sell his products and build his brand nation-wide. In 1889, the Stetson won "best hat" at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, bringing what was considered a uniquely American style to the attention of the world. For advertisements, the brand relied on celebrities who promoted the Western mythos, such as Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and Will Rogers. By 1900, Stetson owned the largest hat factory in the world. In the vein of other philanthropic industrialists of the Gilded Age, Stetson founded a school, a hospital, and a building and loan society for his employees; his company also offered language and Americanization classes.[48] According to the company's own corporate history, "What began in Colorado one hundred and fifty years ago as a way for a young man to stay warm and dry, blossomed into an iconic industrial giant, a true American tale of innovation, perseverance, and adaptation."[49] The brand name is still often used synonymously with the material object, even though there are other brands and manufacturers (Stetson is like Xerox and Kleenex in this regard). More significantly though, the Stetson story is enmeshed in powerful American narratives such as the Horatio Alger mythos and the Turnerian frontier paradigm. What is more, they continue to be employed by RHE Hatco, Inc., the company that holds the license for Stetson hats. This is not to say that the Stetson story is insignificant—far from it; however, it is but one chapter in the cultural history of western hats (Illustration 3).

The origin of western hats is, however, fuzzier and more complex in that this quintessentially American piece of clothing is the product of intercultural and mate-

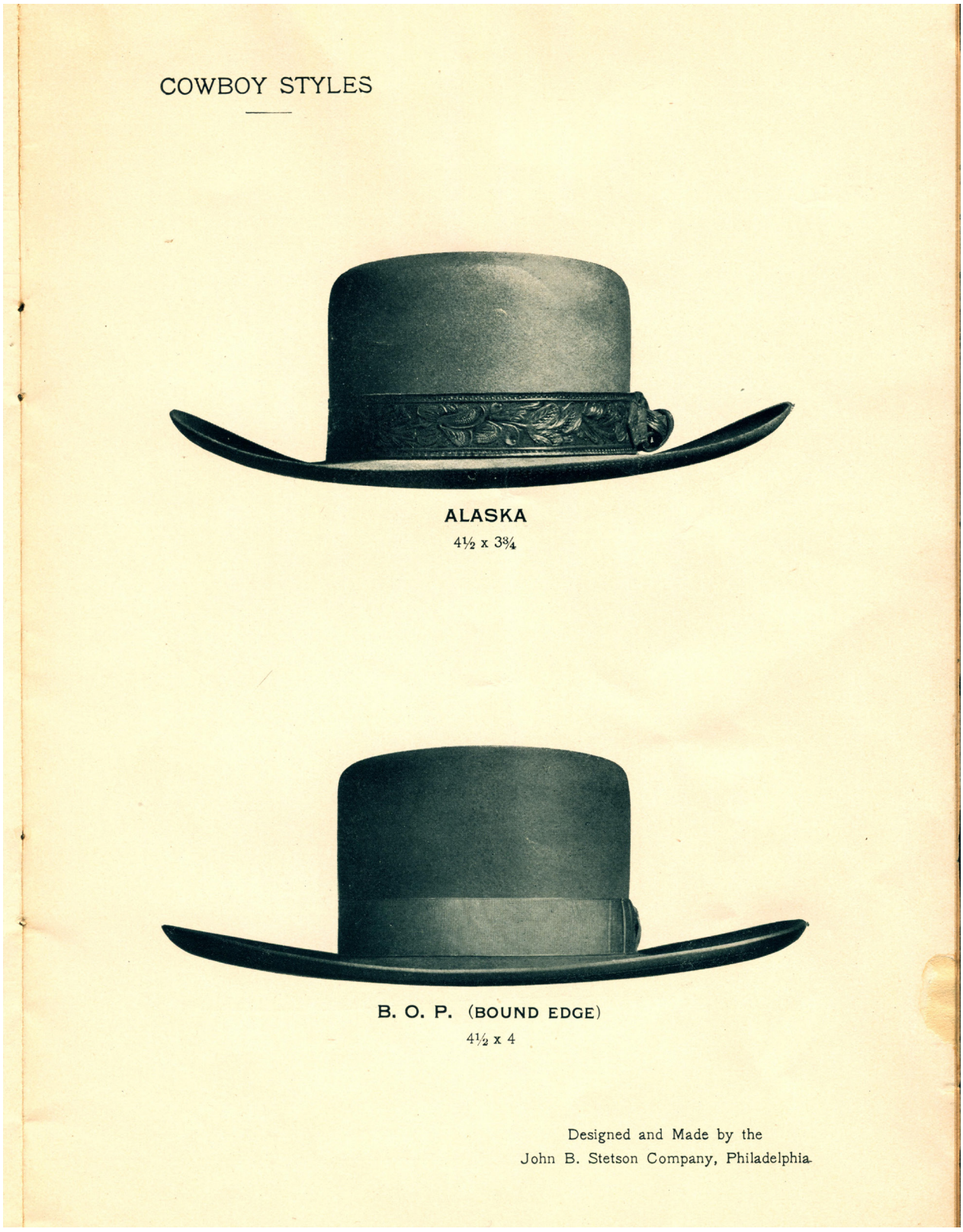


Illustration 3: One (brand) name for many hats.
Scan from *Stetson's Monthly* 1, no. 4 (1899): 11. *Stetson's Monthly* was published by the John B. Stetson Company.

rial exchanges in overlapping zones of contact and its subsequent dispersal across the western US, where it then underwent regional adaptations. Rather than being the felted offspring of John B. Stetson's ingenuity and business acumen, western hats are the product of decades of Anglo-Latino and French cultural practices rubbing against each other in what is now central and southwest Texas. It is well-documented that the lion's share of Anglo-American ranching and horsemanship culture descended from Hispanic vaquero know-how and heritage in what Fred Kniffen has identified as the "Western Cattle Complex."[50] Translated into cranial covers, the origin of the "cowboy hat" was a coming-together and mixing of different hat styles derived from different cultural communities, material flows, and economic agendas.[51] It was in that border region where the Spanish/Mexican poblanos and sombreros met with planter's hats, riverboat gambler's hats, and slouch hats that migrating Southerners brought with them. Since these styles made for practical and often necessary protective headgear, those men who worked cattle ranges in the border regions and then on the cattle drives carried those hats with them. Over time, regionally specific general hat styles developed. Within the context of livestock raising and horsemanship economies, the Trans-Mississippi West is divided into three main regions: the northern plains, the southern plains, and the intermountain region. Hats tended to have wider brims and higher crowns on the southern as opposed to the northern plains.[52] The buckaroos of the California Sierras and the Great Basin developed a very distinct style, sporting a mid-sized, flat-top (or, telescope) crown and a sizable, flat brim. In short, while western hats share basic series of characteristics and qualities, they belie a multicultural heritage and broad regional as well as, of course, individual variety.

What this small corpus of hatological examples and their attendant contexts show—if anything—then it is that western hats matter. Their cultural history is not only as complex as the materials they are usually made of, but also as complex as the country they are conflated with. A specimen of quintessentially American dress, western hats are first and foremost wedded to (hyper)masculine, white male bodies and the position they occupy in the pantheon of the nation's mythos of westward expansion. Teddy Roosevelt, the Lone Ranger, John Wayne's and Clint Eastwood's numerous movie characters, rodeo champion Lane Frost, television sheriff Walt Longmire, Kevin Costner's ranching patriarch John Dutton, and video game outlaws Arthur Morgan and John Marston readily come to mind. However, it does not take too much critical effort to lift the brim that shades these commonly held associations, which undoubtedly still exert significant power, and see that other bodies wear such hats, too—always have. For every Wyatt Earp, there is a Bass Reeves; for every rugged, cattle-driving cowboy on the silver screen, there's an Annie Oakley and an Elizabeth Collins. The world of rodeo does not begin and end with the Professional Rodeo

Cowboys Association (PCRA), since it also includes the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA), La Federación Mexicana de Rodeo (FMR), the Bill Picketts Invitational, the Cowgirls of Color, and the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA), to name but a few. While they may appear to be merely a simple piece of practical clothing, imbued with a set of unambiguous and privileged American meanings, western hats are entangled with material, historical, and cultural complexities that make the American West and, I contend, America at large more difficult.

Acknowledgments

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