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.

7 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction," 1.

8 See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1974) and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18.

9 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction," 1, emphasis added.

10 Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Haciendo caras, una entrada," in *Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1990), xv, xxvii.

11 Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.

12 Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

13 Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," 22; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction," 5.

14 Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay, "Introduction," 1.

15 Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds, "Introduction: What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does it Matter for Moral Theory?" in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

16 Chela Sandoval, quoted in Anzaldúa, "Haciendo caras," xxvii.

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