



THINKING GENDER IN TRANSNATIONAL TIMES

Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance

A Mediterranean Approach
to the Anglosphere

Edited by

Maria Isabel Romero-Ruiz · Pilar Cuder-Domínguez



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Thinking Gender in Transnational Times

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Gender theories have always been important, but no more so than now, when gender is increasingly acknowledged as an essential focus for economics, policy, law and development as well as being central to a range of fields in the humanities and social sciences such as cultural studies, literary criticism, queer studies, ethnic and racial studies, psycho-analytic studies and of course feminist studies. Yet while the growth areas for the field are those that seek to combine interdisciplinary theoretical approaches with transnational arenas of inquiry, or integrate theory and practice, there is currently no book series that foregrounds these exciting set of developments. The series ‘Thinking Gender in Transnational Times’ aims to redress this balance and to showcase the most innovative new work in this arena. We will be focusing on soliciting manuscripts or edited collections that foreground the following: Interdisciplinary work that pushes at the boundaries of existing knowledge and generates innovative contributions to the field. Transnational perspectives that highlight the relevance of gender theories to the analysis of global flows and practices. Integrative approaches that are attentive to the ways in which gender is linked to other areas of analysis such as ‘race’, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, violence, or age. The relationship between theory and practice in ways that assume both are important for sustainable transformation. The impact of power relations as felt by individuals and communities, and related concerns, such as those of structure and agency, or ontology and epistemology In particular, we are interested in publishing original work that pushes at the boundaries of existing theories, extends our gendered understanding of global formations, and takes intellectual risks at the level of form or content. We welcome single or multiple-authored work, work from senior and junior scholars, or collections that provide a range of perspectives on a single theme.

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Thinking Gender in Transnational Times

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This collection is dedicated to all who daily try to make a stand against all kinds of gender violence.

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PRAISE FOR *CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS
OF GENDER VULNERABILITY
AND RESISTANCE*

“The current volume is an important contribution, making up for the gap in the existing scholarship adopting the concept of vulnerability in the field of humanities. Its focus on the cultural representation of gender-based vulnerability and the possibilities of resistance in a transnational context makes the volume a special collection of eleven case studies. Each chapter adopts Judith Butler’s concept of vulnerability as a human condition for studying various English language-based cultures from a Mediterranean perspective. The focus on the gendered materializations of precarity makes the volume a fascinating read, tracing down the movement of the concept through a rich collection of case studies. It is an indispensable read for a diverse group of scholars for its multidisciplinary approach, drawing from Animal Studies, Critical Race Studies, Human Rights Studies, Post-Humanism and Postcolonialism within a feminist framework of vulnerability.”

—Erzsébet Barát, *Associate Professor in Gender Studies and Linguistics,
University of Szeged and Central European University*

“A heart-felt welcome to this most needed approach to the study of precarity and vulnerability, innovatively analyzed from transnational feminist perspectives. The volume examines an impressive wide range of cultural representations of gender-based vulnerability in diverse settings of the Anglophone world. Emanating from the in-depth scrutiny of representations of precarity, vulnerability and the responses to them, such

as resilience and resistance, within the international project ‘Bodies in Transit 2’, this volume showcases the intense current debates around agency, relationality, trans* identities and post-identities through an interesting and pertinent selection of cultural materials from Australia, Canada, India, Ireland, the UK and the U.S.A. Undoubtedly, a most useful collection for those working in Gender Studies, Vulnerability Studies, and Cultural Studies.”

— Belén Martín-Lucas, *Professor in English, U. de Vigo (Spain),
Co-editor of Narratives of Difference in Globalized Cultures* (Palgrave
Macmillan, 2017)

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Introduction

Maria Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez

Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere considers the cultural representation of gender violence, vulnerability and resistance with a focus on the transnational dimension of our contemporary visual and literary cultures in English. Previous research on the notion of vulnerability gained momentum when Judith Butler (2004) theorized on the sociopolitical context of the USA after 9/11. According to her, by exposing the vulnerability of one of the most powerful countries in the world, the attacks to the World Trade Centre in 2001 would force the USA to acknowledge a common humanity with less developed countries whose vulnerability in comparison with USA's political, economic and military superiority had been wielded to justify its imperialistic policies in

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the Middle East. The concept of vulnerability thus re-emerged in close relation with Trauma Studies. Similarly, in the Introduction to their edited collection, Catriona Mackenzie et al. (2014) establish the idea that vulnerability as a condition pertaining to humanity exposes human beings to illness, injury, disability and death, giving to the notion a social and emotional dimension. They point out that human beings are also vulnerable to the environment and even to technologies. Consequently, precarity materializes in tangible life conditions determined by unemployment, poverty, migration, political corruption or environmental changes, military aggression against civilians and high criminality rates, racial and ethnic discrimination, poor healthcare systems, religious or gender discrimination or limited access to spaces and technologies and sociopolitical participation, as well as justice. Because these are common features of our contemporary world, the concept of vulnerability is likewise linked to the complex issue of the subjects' specific responses, and particularly to whether they will strive for resilience (often critiqued as being closely knitted to neoliberal, late-capitalist ideas of success) or opt for resistance (more closely connected to subaltern subjectivities).

Vulnerability Studies have gained traction in the last few years. An Academia.edu search on the topic turned up over 10,000 followers and over 11,000 paper titles. However, most of the output comes from the Social Sciences and relatively little contribution has been made to date in the Humanities. Therefore, *Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere* aims to fill this gap within Literary and Cultural Studies by undertaking the analysis of concepts such as vulnerability, resilience, precarity and resistance in a wide range of cultural texts written in English. These texts have been published or circulated in the last two decades across a wide geography encompassing India, Ireland, Canada, the USA and the UK: memoirs and testimonies, films, TV series, crime fiction and literary fiction. Thus, the collection provides a rich array of cultural case studies to explore gender vulnerability in a transnational framework, in turn providing fresh insights into vulnerability itself as a "travelling theory," following Edward Said's (1983) formulation. In his view, ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation and from one period to another. In his words, cultural and intellectual life is nourished by the circulation of ideas, and it is important to discern if these ideas or theories gain or lose strength when travelling from one culture to another. This is indeed the volume's further aim: to meditate on the

application of theories of vulnerability and resistance in different spatial and temporal frames so that it can be asserted whether these notions are adopted or resisted in the diverse cultures that the literary and visual texts represent, developing new positions in relation to the original ones. In tracing these conceptual travels, the collected essays avoid regarding different contexts as simply passive receptacles or recipients of theories and instead posit them as creative dynamic sites which add interesting dimensions to thinking through gender-based vulnerability and resistance.

Transnationalism is not only a key term for the analytical framework adopted in *Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere*; it is also descriptive of the contributors, a group of gender studies scholars based in Spanish and Portuguese universities that have for some time been collaborating in the analysis of cultural productions in English. Their work has been enabled by two subsequent research projects collectively entitled “Bodies in Transit” that have obtained funding from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. We adopt the Mediterranean as a vantage point from which to look on a globalised world, acknowledging on the one hand that the Mediterranean has for ages been a space of cultural encounters and hybridisation, and on the other, that on this day and age it is likewise subject to ongoing processes of exclusion and discrimination that must be open to our scrutiny. As part of the outputs of the project, in the Spring of 2019 an international seminar on Vulnerability in Literary and Cultural Studies was organised by María Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Elena Cantueso-Urbano and hosted by the University of Malaga. This productive forum enabled many critical conversations, and the workshopped papers became the starting point for this book. When she first theorised the notion of vulnerability, Butler (2004) emphasised the relevance that representing vulnerable alterity has in constituting the basis of mutual humanity beyond the enforcement of exclusionary policies and ideologies. *Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere* intends to explore the literary and media displays of precarious conditions. Its aim is to look into how these displays are affected when intersecting with various gender and ethnic identities, thus resulting in structural forms of vulnerability that generate and justify diverse forms of oppression, and forms of individual or collective resistance and/or resilience, acknowledging a condition of mutual vulnerability.

The collection comprises eleven chapters structured into three thematic sections meant to elucidate different contexts and related definitions within the field. The first section, “Gender Vulnerability, Resilience and Resistance”, teases out and contrasts various responses to gender-based violence. In rethinking vulnerability and resistance together, Butler later claims that vulnerability is not ontological but politically imposed and unequally distributed. Those more vulnerable oppose this condition first by recognising it and then through performative bodily acts of resistance (2016, 13–27). However, the latter imply taking risks, as Butler argues: “[I]t is already more than clear that those who gather to resist various forms of state and economic power are taking a risk with their own bodies, exposing themselves to possible harm” (2016, 12). Nonetheless, she claims, “there is plural and performative bodily resistance at work that shows how bodies are being enacted on by social and economic policies that are decimating livelihoods”. Moreover, “these bodies, in showing this precarity, are also resisting those very powers; they enact a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity” (2016, 15). Resistance emerges from “a space of appearance”, that is, from being seen and acknowledged (Butler 2016, 14).

In contrast, Sarah Bracke argues that resistance is “characterised as the ability of something or someone to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched, pressed, or bent” (2016, 54). In her view, resistance leads to resilience and often subjects who are vulnerable and victims of trauma or violence want to recover their subjectivities and identities through a “denial of vulnerability” and “a disidentification with dependence”, gaining restoration and agency (Bracke 2016, 59). According to Bracke, resilience is used by neoliberal governments to deny vulnerability and justify violence. She claims that those marginalised are named “resilient” not in relation to security, since they are not secure, but in relation to survival as their capacity to overcome threats and attacks from those in power. She proposes to call this group “a subject of subaltern resilience, or the resilience of the wretched of the earth, which is born out of the practice of getting up in the morning and making it through the day in conditions of often unbearable symbolic and material violence” (2016, 60). Resilience, from her point of view, is a mode of subjectification used by biopower; she affirms that we are entertained with the idea of becoming resilient without exploring other possible ways, without challenging the power which causes these situations and our vulnerability (Bracke 2016, 61–62).

In the first essay in this section, Elena Cantueso-Urbano describes that precise kind of resilience for the survivors of the Irish Magdalene Laundries system. “Growing Resilient in Irish Magdalene Laundries: An Analysis of the Justice for Magdalenes’ Oral History Project (2013) and Kathy O’Beirne’s Autobiography *Kathy’s Story. A Childhood Hell inside the Magdalen Laundries* (2005)” examines the reform system for “deviant” women that was in force in Ireland for the best part of two centuries in the voice of some of its survivors. These testimonies, variously collected by activists involved in the Justice for Magdalenes’ Oral History Project or by the survivors themselves, attest to multiple forms of resistance within and without those institutions as well as to the women’s growing resilience in the face of their trauma and of Irish society’s refusal to provide the reparation they demand or to bring the Church and the Irish state—the perpetrators—to account. Cantueso-Urbano concludes that in the case of the Magdalenes’ vulnerability, resistance and resilience complement each other enabling survival and opening a path to healing. Gender violence is also the subject of the next chapter in the section, “Vulnerable Bodies, Resistant Minds and Resilient Subjects in Emma Donoghue’s *Room*”. This groundbreaking novel, inspired by a real case of sexual violence, provides María Elena Jaime-de Pablos with a case study for what she conceives of as a two-stage process grounded in resistance against repeated acts of psychological, physical and sexual violence and eventually evolving towards resilience, drawing from Boris Cyrulnik’s theory. The abusive conditions suffered by Ma and Jack in the novel are analysed with the help of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, whereas the different forms of violence they encounter, this time wielded by mass media and the medical establishment in their pressure for them to conform and integrate, are examined under the lens of Foucault’s panopticon and Judith Butler’s theory of language. For Jaime-de Pablos, then, Donoghue’s fiction conveys a compelling picture of vulnerability in resistance. In the next chapter, “Of Mice and Women: Gendered and Speciesist Violence in Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘Martyrdom’”, Maria Sofia Pimentel-Biscaia approaches a different kind of sexual violence against women as relayed by the US author in her short story “Martyrdom”. The text is a brutal allegory of marriage where a cruel husband abuses his wife, Babygirl, by neglecting, beating, prostituting and, in the end, raping her with a live rat. This horrifying intersection of patriarchal and speciesist violence is based on a conceptual definition of women and rats as subaltern subjects to human males and therefore bound to be treated

differently, in this case as mere instruments for the human male's sexual gratification. Pimentel-Biscaia's analysis is sustained on recent debates on vulnerability and its relation to resistance outlined above and aims to untangle the multiple threads of systemic violence exerted over subaltern subjectivities, an aim shared as well by other chapters in the collection, more specifically here through the instrumentalisation of animal bodies. Closing this section, "'Nobody Kills a Priest': Irish Noir and Pathogenic Vulnerability in Benjamin Black's *Holy Orders*" turns to consider the concept of "institutional precariousness" drawn by Brian S. Turner (2006), insofar as it affected certain social groups in 1950s Ireland as portrayed by Benjamin Black (John Banville's crime fiction penname). Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides argues that *Holy Orders* focuses on the multi-layered precarity and pathogenic vulnerability of the travellers to the corrupted network of Catholic authorities, the press and the police at the time, so that the bodies of this subaltern community (and particularly those of its women and children) remain under control and any form of resistance becomes void, leading to further victimisation. The novel also sketches the possibility of vigilantism to bring about some sort of reparative justice in the face of such institutional corruption and the system's general lack of accountability and frames questions about how to make these subjects' lives fully livable.

The second section, "Gender Vulnerability, Agency and Interdependency," introduces two other related concepts, agency (a key topic in much feminist theory to date) and interdependencies (resulting from the acknowledgement of our deeply human vulnerability). Bracke claims that when individuals willingly become the subjects of a moral discourse, that endows them with agency (2016, 62–63). But, as Mary Evans argues, agency in relation to gender or when applied to women is circumscribed by notions of patriarchy, that is, as defined by men and associated with them and their actions. Therefore, agency is on the feminist agenda "to challenge the poverty and the lack of social power of women in both the global north and the global south" (Evans 2013, 48). She makes use of the idea of "gendering agency" by attributing features of "individualism, self-sufficiency, voluntarism, unencumberedness and free action" as characteristic of the male gender. These traits must be imitated by women in order to gain agency in a patriarchal world (Evans 2013, 48). Further, she sees agency as arising from a subject's sympathy towards the suffering

of others in our modern world and from his/her subsequent wish to alleviate it. In her opinion, agency can be also associated with the body and emotional health (Evans 2013, 51, 54).

In this sense, in their introduction to their edition, Mackenzie et al. establish that vulnerability is something inherent to the human condition and argue that we are not only vulnerable to the actions of others, but also dependent on their care and support. These ideas locate the vulnerable subject at the heart of social policy and state responsibility (2014, 4–5), and this is part of the argument of some contributors to this volume, like Pérez-Vides above. They also establish a taxonomy of vulnerability and speak of “inherent vulnerability” when the origin of this condition is intrinsic to the human condition; “situational vulnerability”, when it is context-specific; “dispositional/occurrent vulnerability” when there is a distinction between potential and actual vulnerability; and “pathogenic vulnerability” defined as generated by a variety of sources like abusive social and interpersonal relationships, sociopolitical oppression or injustice (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 7–9). Similarly, they make people with power and authority responsible for the vulnerable condition of others (especially children and the elderly, but also women and gender minorities in certain geographical locations) and its amelioration. The intention is to endorse national and transnational aims such as promoting autonomy, implementing social justice and avoiding exploitation to provide the vulnerable with respect and dignity (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 13–15). In her reflections about precarity, Judith Butler meditates on contemporary violence and on global events that make her wonder: “Who counts as human, Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life?*” (2004, 20; emphasis in original). According to her notion of precarity, the lives and deaths of the people who belong to the category of the other and the subaltern do not deserve public mourning. They cannot be labelled as human, as their destinies are not a matter of concern for the regimes of power that control them. Butler defines bodies as associated with mortality, vulnerability and agency; she affirms that we live in communities and we are all interdependent. And yet, there are certain groups who are more vulnerable to violence than others, such as the bodies of the poor, the sexually “deviant” and the “racialised other”. These are all bodies vulnerable to political and social conditions and, as such, victims of different forms of violence. Butler’s discourse of dehumanisation of certain individuals and groups is a complex one. According to this discourse, subaltern groups do not deserve being regarded as

human, nor does in consequence their loss deserve any grief (Butler 2004, 26–29).

As social and political beings, we are produced, recognised and represented by power but those excluded from the social system fail to be represented and to be considered human: “... those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanised, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed not regarded at all” (Butler 2004, 147). This is one of the aims of this volume: to give representation through literature and popular culture to individuals who are the victims of violence and discrimination, whose lives are precarious in a transnational context that covers different parts of the Anglosphere. This is very much the case in Pilar Cuder-Domínguez’s chapter, “Crime Fiction’s Disobedient Gaze: Refugees’ Vulnerability in Ausma Zehanat Khan’s *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018), which, like the last chapter in the previous section, addresses the power of the crime genre to denounce systemic forms of violence against certain collectivities (here, refugees) and the failure of institutions (here supranational rather than national) to end them. The chapter’s main argument is that the refugees’ situational vulnerability is compounded both by the contradictions inherent in the discourse of international human rights and by the racial and gender politics of nations towards forced migration. It shows, through the crime genre plot in Khan’s novel, that female and male refugees are perceived and treated differently despite their common racialisation; risk is emphasised in the case of men, vulnerability in women. Cuder-Domínguez concludes that Khan uses crime genre conventions for advocacy for refugees, both by stressing their agency and by using empathy to dismantle the affective economies of hate that keep them as subaltern subjects. Continuing this crime fiction thread, the chapter “Detection, Gender Violence and Atkinson’s Jackson Brodie series” by Beatriz Domínguez-García analyses the British author’s use of detection in the light of Marcia Mueller’s definition of “humanistic” crime fiction as that conveying a pointed social critique. In so doing, Domínguez-García finds strong differences between the portrayal of the detective/hero Jackson Brodie in the written series and in the BBC adaptation. In the former, Brodie’s repeated exposure to multifarious forms of violence against women (starting with the murder/rape of his sister) increases his own vulnerability; his empathic connection to victims and survivors of gender violence renders him ultimately powerless and in turn

empowers the women, promoting their autonomy. On the contrary, in the BBC series the detective/hero retains his agency; his stronger detachment allows him to continue to perform his patriarchal duty of male care over the female victims. In “Resisting Binaries: Vulnerability and Agency through a Feminist Critical Gaze”, Guillermo Iglesias-Díaz takes another turn to the concept of resistance, arguing that a feminist, critical gaze in film narrative is not only possible but, arguably, one of the most effective forms of resistance. Although vulnerability has been traditionally opposed to resistance and agency, this proposition has been contested recently as a simplistic opposition of the binary kind. In the film *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold 2008), the myth of the male sovereign subject in Teresa De Lauretis’s technologies of power is inverted, and it is the male character that is under the female gaze. Iglesias-Díaz’s analysis is focused on how Arnold presents her characters as vulnerable but always with full agency, and never as victims. The dualism victims/agents is similarly relevant in María Isabel Romero-Ruiz’s chapter, “Trans-national Neo-Victorianism, Vulnerability and Gender in Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2006)”, where she explains how the trope of the presence of Empire in the Victorian period allows for neo-Victorian novels to deal with issues of vulnerability in the confrontation between colonisers and colonised populations. To the transnational approach, she adds the gender dimension by stressing the female role in the colonisation process and the situation of extreme vulnerability of native women in Australia. At the same time, she questions the construction of a British identity associated with civilisation in contrast with that of the native population. On the contrary, Romero-Ruiz’s contention is that both sides became involved in a relationship of mutual vulnerability.

The third and final section, “Gender Vulnerability and Trans*/Post-Identities”, seeks new paths to envisage embodiment beyond heteronormative constrictions in recent TV, Sci-Fi film and dystopian fiction. Its three chapters look into the cultural representations of non-binary identities in combination with vulnerability. “The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema” engages with contemporary debates around techno-culture and feminist posthumanism to explore the meanings, paradoxes and contradictions of the posthuman in its embodied perspective. Here Rocío Carrasco-Carraso takes as a point of departure the premise that posthuman beings are frequently depicted as vulnerable beings doomed to privileging and perpetuating the “normative” idea of the body in terms of gender and race. However, in her discussion of the

films *Under the Skin* (2013) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), by Glazer and Sanders, respectively, she argues that these characters still manage to disrupt established configurations of power by offering audiences an unfamiliar experience. This is achieved through filmic strategies such as identification or sympathy, enabling us to temporarily refuse normative human ethics and to understand the posthuman subject as it is, with its alien/transhuman body and non-normative actions and desires. In the next chapter, “Trans* Vulnerability and Resistance in the Ballroom: A Case Study of *Pose* (Season 1)”, Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad explores ballroom culture in 1980s New York bringing to the fore a variety of vulnerable subaltern identities that go through a process of total rejection and nullification in both homo and heteronormative communities due to their ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. He understands the trans* condition as one that leads to resistance instead of reproducing heteronormative dichotomies of gender, sex and sexuality in a continuous process of “(un)becoming other(s)”. In doing so, the trans* subject reflects the contradictions inherent to any embodiment of a model figure, which Hidalgo-Ciudad reads as a generative nothingness which explodes in a volatile multiplicity that nullifies “normality”. Finally, Antonia Navarro-Tejero’s chapter “A Trans Journey towards Resistance: Vulnerability and Resilience in the Dystopian Narrative of Manjula Padmanabhan” looks into concepts of womanhood and Indianness that intersect with ideas about vulnerability and resilience in two feminist dystopian narratives by Manjula Padmanabhan, *Escape* (2008) and its sequel *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015). Fluid gendered resistance in the context of female genocide in India becomes the tool to combat sexual violence and bring about solidarity through the lens of aligned resilience. Navarro-Tejero argues that the trans protagonists are victims who achieve empowerment and contends that Padmanabhan’s feminist dystopian fiction is channelling South Asian women’s anger about the misogyny of the present and their anxiety about a future where reproduction is instrumentalised and trans women are violently abused.

While the collection’s main critical conversation is staged in the fields of Gender and Vulnerability Studies generally, the above description of the chapters proves that the contributors also draw substantial insights from Animal Studies, Critical Race Studies, Human Rights Studies, Post-Humanism and Postcolonialism. These engaging, interconnected fields and their concepts are addressed by contributors in this volume through the analysis of the representation of gender-based vulnerability in a rich

variety of cultural texts that the book addresses across a wide geography, resulting in a proportional wealth of insights into the overall field of Gender and Vulnerability Studies. In addition, as stated before, all these theories about and/or connected with vulnerability are interrelated by a common thread which is Said's travelling theory. As mentioned above, for Said a theory or an idea, wherever it arises, is always the result of specific historical circumstances but it is often used again in different circumstances and for new reasons, offering new possibilities and establishing its limits (Said 1983, 230). However, he contends that theories must never lose touch with their origins in politics, society and economics and can change depending on history and a particular situation (Said 1983, 234, 237). In his view, critical consciousness entails awareness of the differences between situations, awareness also of the fact that no theory or system exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. After all, it is the exchange and circulation of ideas that nourish cultural and intellectual life. And, above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict (Said 1983, 242). Said's notions have proved essential to our work in this volume, as we have kept always in sight the diverse approaches to theories of gender-based vulnerability which travel across different locations and historical periods. We are grateful to the contributors for being our travel companions in this particular project and we also want to express our gratitude to Leticia Sabsay for encouraging us along the way. It is our hope that the collection will be making a meaningful contribution to current feminist conversations around issues of gender violence, vulnerability and resistance in the Humanities and more specifically in the fields of Literary and Cultural studies, where, despite the powerful emergence of Vulnerability Studies as a productive area of inquiry in the last two decades, it remains still very much a minority concern.

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PART I

Gender Vulnerability, Resilience
and Resistance



CHAPTER 2

Growing Resilient in Irish Magdalene Laundries: An Analysis of the Justice for Magdalenes' Oral History Project (2013) and Kathy O'Beirne's Autobiography *Kathy's Story: A Childhood Hell Inside the Magdalen Laundries* (2005)

Elena Cantueso-Urbano

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Irish reformatory institutions were established back in the eighteenth century to offer shelter to those in need. During the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth century, philanthropic workers sent women to refuges and Laundries at a time when prostitution became a great social

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problem. Once the Catholic Church got control of these institutions in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a more punitive and repressive attitude was adopted (Luddy 1995a, 47). At the turn of the twentieth century, the attitude towards “deviant women”—prostitutes and unmarried mothers—and the treatment these women received in Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes became harsher (Titley 2006, 9; Luddy 2011, 109–126; O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012, 17–20).

It is not only the coercive confinement of women, but also the cruel practices carried out inside Laundries that motivates us to consider Magdalene Laundries as instruments of power which victimised thousands of women in Ireland rendering them in a vulnerable and precarious condition. Many scholars have questioned the role of these reformatory institutions in the rehabilitation of “outcasts”. Common to all the scholars who have analysed Magdalene Laundries is the idea that they were tools of oppression rather than of reform (McCormick 2009, 50; Luddy 2007, 237; O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012, 2; Simpson et al. 2014, 261). The discourse of vulnerability and ethical demands towards those in need—prostitutes and unmarried mothers—adopted by humanitarian practices should be understood as a form of institutionalised violence (Fassin 2012, 1–8).

In his book, *Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life* Fassin refers to humanitarian intervention as biopolitics in so far as it manages and controls those named “vulnerable”, but also as politics of life since the victims are represented as powerless beings in need of protection. That division between the powerful and the weak is thus created by humanitarianism. Hence, this practice essentialises and objectifies the victim (Fassin 2007, 501–519). By naming them vulnerable, prostitutes and unmarried mothers were deprived of their agency and identity and therefore were better controlled and regulated. These humanitarian enterprises did contribute to the stigmatisation and precarisation of these women in Ireland claiming ethical demands on the witnesses of suffering without accounting for their role in contributing to their vulnerability: “By ignoring the role we all play in the differential distribution of vulnerability and its political character, humanitarianism does not really question the causes that produce this inequality” (Sabsay 2016, 180).

After the truth behind Magdalene Laundries gained public attention in the 1990s, thanks to the documentary “Sex in a Cold Climate”, many women started to raise their voices sharing their traumatic stories about a life of abuse. The unveiled corruption behind religious congregations

challenged the position of the Church in Ireland, as well as of the State given its complicity in sending women to reformatory institutions. Due to this public persecution, the Church finally closed the last Magdalene Laundry in 1996. The economic and social transformation of Ireland during the Celtic Tiger period had also, as O’Sullivan and O’Donnell claim, “profound implications for the architecture of coercive confinement” (2012, 254). The progressive spread of secular mentality and the improvement of women’s conditions in society since the 1970s were translated into fewer women sent to Magdalene Homes (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell 2012, 254–275).

We should say, though, that the closure of the last Magdalene Laundry only represents the partial end of a coercive system which subjugated “deviant women”. Yet, the finalisation of this repressive system and the compensation to the victims were arduous tasks for the nation. According to Butler, there are two paths towards the derealisation of the “Other”, which are violence and omission of public recognition (Butler 2006, 34–36). In the case of Magdalene Laundries’ survivors, they suffered both types of violence. The concealing attitude of the Church, the State and of the whole society amounted to the silencing of these women since they were not provided with any support. Being offered no recognition or help, as we are about to see, these women were silenced and moved away from the public sphere in order to preserve the reputation and prestige of those in power, as well as the ideal image of the country fabricated in the Post-independence period.

However, these women found support in a non-profit organisation called “Justice for Magdalenes” (2003), which was created by Katherine O’Donnell, Claire McGettrick, Maeve O’Rourke, James Smith and Mari Steed. Their goal was to offer public recognition to Magdalene survivors and to promote research into Magdalene Laundries and similar institutions using the testimonies offered by former inmates. The dissemination of the facts and spread of the illegal detention and abuse of thousands of women in Ireland contributed to the public recognition of the victims. Their active role in defending this cause, ended up in the government’s recognition of its accountability and an apology. According to Fassin and Gray, in the process of bearing witness to others’ testimonies, the victims become objects of analysis and their account is shaped by the limitations of the genre—interviews—(Fassin 2007, 517; Gray 2003, 13). Yet, these life narratives are not conditioned by the presence of an interviewer who interprets the oral testimonies or focuses on those

aspects he/she wants to emphasise. The interviewer gives these women the opportunity to speak and agency to do it, they are individualised against the homogenising discourse which objectified them, and they are empowered by providing them with spaces to speak. Others like Kathy O’Beirne found in literature a safe way to tell their stories. Her autobiography, published eight years before the Oral History Project started, offers an unofficial testimonial of events and gives voice to all those silenced challenging a secretive system by openly exposing the reality behind Irish reformatory institutions. At the end of the twentieth century, life writing started to disclose issues related to the family and sex, which used to be considered private matters. Hence, the private–public dichotomy was blurred granting women a space to talk (Grubgeld 2006, 233). Kathy O’Beirne’s autobiography can be read as a way of healing her wounds at the same time that she unveils a reality hidden for so long.

Previous research on Magdalene Laundries has focused on the historical analysis of these institutions by scholars like James Smith (2007), Maria Luddy (2007, 2011), Frances Finnegan (2004), Rebecca Lea McCarthy (2010), Brian Titley (2006), or Eoin O’Sullivan and Ian O’Donnell (2012). More specifically, previous research on the vulnerability and violence executed against unmarried mothers in Magdalene Laundries has focused on the analysis of Conlon-McKenna’s novel *The Magdalen* and films such as Peter Mullan’s *The Magdalen Sisters*, Stephen Frear’s *Philomena*, and Aisling Walsh’s *Sinners* by scholars such as James Smith (2007), M^a Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides (2013), Aida Rosende Pérez (2006) or Paula Murphy (2006).

However, in this chapter, I will focus on the testimonies offered by some survivors gathered in Justice for Magdalenes’ Oral History Project (2013) to analyse the different resistant/resilient techniques used by women inside and outside the Laundries to prove that their confinement was a repressive one and that vulnerability is not an innate characteristic of women as many have defended, but an ontological condition politically assigned by those in power. In the second part, I will analyse Katy O’Beirne’s autobiography *Kathy’s Story: A Childhood Hell inside the Magdalen Laundries* (2005) to see how the victims of Magdalene Laundries have tried to overcome the trauma of a life of abuse and incarceration and to analyse the help offered to them. As Edward Said says in his book *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1982), any theory travels in space and time and is adapted to the circumstances of the context. For that theory to exist, critical consciousness is a precondition which allows for

the theory to take multiple forms and interpretations (Said 1982, 223, 241–242). In my case study, I will employ Butler’s theory of embodied resistance against vulnerability for the first part, adapting it to the context of twentieth-century Ireland. For the second part, I will use Herman and Laub’s stages of trauma recovery together with Yates and Pasteur’s concept of resilience to see how these women have tried to overcome their trauma. Considering resilience and resistance as complementary concepts, the aim of this chapter is to explore how these women resisted the vulnerable condition they were relegated to and to establish whether they were offered help in the aftermath of their release.

2.2 RESISTING AN IMPOSED VULNERABILITY INSIDE THE LAUNDRIES: JUSTICE FOR MAGDALENES’ ORAL HISTORY PROJECT (2013)

According to Butler’s idea of the “geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability” (2006, 29), some people are more vulnerable than others. In twentieth-century Ireland, Angelina Mayfield, Lucy, Bernadette, Kathleen R., Philomena, Evelyn, Mary, Kate O’Sullivan and Martha were some of the thousands of women who suffered the misfortune of being too vulnerable to live their own lives. Mary, Bernadette and Mary Currington were born out of wedlock, so they were sent to Industrial Schools where they were raised and moved to Magdalene Laundries later. Some of them, like Bernadette, were sent to Mother and Baby Homes¹ to give birth to their offspring before being confined in a Magdalene Laundry and deprived of their illegitimate children. The rest were sent to Magdalene Laundries during adolescence. All of them were confined by a relative, the police, the social services or the priest in Magdalene Laundries established in Limerick, Dublin, Belfast, New Ross, Sunday Well, Waterford and High Park by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and the Good Shepherd Sisters.

These Magdalenes’ stories are linked by the fact that they contravened the Catholic teachings of the time which required women to be passive, chaste and pure (Luddy 1995b, 1). Rather than looking into the problems these women were enduring, the State and the Church condemned them as sinful women in need of restraint. Their confinement in reformatory institutions was intended for their moral improvement and for preventing the public contagion of this immorality. Therefore, their role was far from

a social one, but one of oppression assuming these women were vulnerable and sinful by nature. During their confinement, strict disciplinary measures were adopted to reform them such as hard work, constant surveillance, fasting, prayers, physical and psychological punishment, and deprivation of their names and possessions (Smith; Finnegan; Luddy). All these practices carried out inside the Laundry made women vulnerable since their humanity and corporeal integrity were endangered. The public dimension of the Magdalenes' bodies made them vulnerable by exposing them to the violence executed by the nuns. Following Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, as political and social subjects our body is exposed to power and to vulnerability, but that does not imply we cannot grow resistant. These scholars disagree with those feminists who stigmatise gender division by considering women naturally vulnerable. On the contrary, they claim vulnerability is a general condition of any human being which can be resisted (Butler et al. 2016, 2). Recently, vulnerability and resistance have been rethought in connection with resilience in our present society attacked by terrorism or war. Most of the literature on resilience tackles vulnerable sectors of society exposed to natural risks and socio-economic changes. In recent years, a wider scope was adopted including women and marginalised sectors of society on the grounds of race, class, gender and ethnicity. Although resilience has always had positive connotations and vulnerability has implied negativity and powerlessness, scholars are claiming these concepts are complementary (Miller et al. 2010; Bracke 2016). In this part we use both resilience and resistance as complementary concepts referring to how Magdalenes combated their vulnerability inside the Laundries.

When asked about the survival technique they adopted inside the Laundries some of them admit that fear of the consequences discouraged them to take action (O'Donnell et al. 2013b, 63). Although some inmates adopted a resigned attitude inside the Laundry so as not to get into trouble, as it is the case of Bernadette, Kate O'Sullivan or Mary Currington (O'Donnell et al. 2013b, 63; 2013c, 26; 2013h, 88), some others tended to rebel against this coercive disciplinary system by adopting an rebellious attitude or by going on strikes for which they were expelled (O'Donnell et al. 2013d, 46–47; O'Beirne 2005, 132, 144). They put their lives at risk not only by going on hunger strike, but also by attempting suicide: "... And then I had to...I [Angelina Mayfield] to be continuously planning...either suicide or running away. Now my planning of suicide was to build up these yellow tablets that this nun was

pushing at me and pretend I'd taken them and then...or run away, so I decided that the running away bit sounded better (laughs) I'm a bit of a coward, I didn't want to commit suicide" (O'Donnell et al. 2013a, 58). As Butler claims, vulnerability is part of resistance, and it is through our speech and bodily acts that we can resist social norms and precarity (2016, 15). These women drew upon their vulnerability to grow resistant/resilient; what these practices reveal is the impossibility to bear their confinement and the desperation to be free. Attacking their own bodies as their only possession was the only alternative they had of being heard. Furthermore, committing suicide can be considered a resistance/resilient technique challenging the Catholic power since it implies committing a sin in the eyes of the nuns.

But the most common subversive technique the women talk about was escaping. Angelina Mayfield's testimony perfectly narrates how difficult it was to escape from the Laundry:

But it took us a while to work that one out but we did (laughs) and then I don't know where we used to get these ropes from, heaven knows where we would find these ropes and we would tie the rope on the tree and try and get out. But because it would take us so long, probably not realising that the nun would be watching us planning this...so by the time we got down that policeman was down there ready and then trying to make us get back up the same way! (Laughs) (O'Donnell et al. 2013a, 59)

What this testimony reveals is, on the one hand, the desperation of all these women who risked their lives in an attempt to be free, and on the other, the coercive attitude of the Church as well as the complicity of society and the State in the confinement of these women. Their vulnerability is firstly produced by a gossipy and judgemental society which constantly guarded those women and denounced their "immoral" behaviour, and secondly, by the nuns who monitored these women day and night once confined. In addition, these Magdalene women suffered the consequences of challenging the nuns' power. Misbehaving, escaping or going on strikes were reasons for punishment. As a result of what the nuns considered to be lack of respect, these women were physically punished. In Evelyn's words:

Well, if you can visualise a belt or a big cane, that's how we were punished. You'd get grabbed by the hair, dragged into the office to see the Mother

Superior, and you'd have to explain yourself—there again you weren't always given a chance to explain yourself—and you'd get the cane across the backside, across the legs or the belt, depending on who...depending on who is in charge to give you... the whacking ... (O'Donnell et al. 2013d, 7–29)

As we can see in these quotations, the Magdalenes' bodies, exposed to the nuns' power, became vulnerable to these reformatory techniques which aimed at imprinting purity on them through blows and humiliations. As Butler claims,

the body implies mortality, vulnerability, and agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence... The body has its inevitably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears the imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life ... (Butler 2006, 26)

This physical violence exerted upon the Magdalene women can be considered an unjustified form of subjugation which rendered them in a precarious condition rather than contributed to their reformation. The resistant/resilient attitude adopted by these women was translated into more vulnerability. However, it is by admitting their vulnerable condition and resisting it that women grew resilient. In Butler's words, "... these bodies, in showing this precarity, are also resisting these very powers; they enact a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity" (Butler 2016, 15). Even though these women were unable to change the system which subjugated them, the mere fact of resisting it gives them agency; as Butler claims, we cannot destroy the system since we are dependent on it, but we can change it through resistance by not citing the law (Butler 2016, 19).

These embodied protests analysed here are forms of demanding their agency and a way of resistance challenging the State's and the Church's sovereignty. Yet, the impossibility to change the system and the punishment they received if they tried to do so encouraged some of the women to accept it. The identities of these women were erased, and their corporealities endangered by the physical and psychological punishment the nuns exerted on them to be "rehabilitated". However, the resilient attitude of some of these women shows their willingness to resist an unjust power which, far from offering them help, endangered their survival.

2.3 THE AFTERMATH OF MAGDALENE LAUNDRIES: KATHY O'BEIRNE'S *KATHY'S STORY: A CHILDHOOD HELL INSIDE THE MAGDALEN LAUNDRIES* (2005)

A common technique of survival adopted by the victims of the abuse suffered inside the Laundries after their release has been silence, recognised by scholars as a mechanism of defence (Laub 1992, 58). Most of the explanation for this silence should be found in the stigma attached to Magdalenes which continued chasing these women even after their release (Luddy 2011, 109). Fear and shame prevented these women from openly talking about their experience (Finnegan 2004, 103; Smith 2007, 66). However, in contrast with those women who kept silent, the majority found the courage to raise their voices. Psychologists like Laub (1995) believe that trauma can only be overcome when the repressed is released by sharing it with others. After many years of silence and suffering, Kathy O'Beirne found the strength to raise her voice revealing her truth and claiming justice and compensation in her autobiography. Claude Hurlbert defends the idea that writing is a technique of healing and sharing knowledge. According to him, writing is about putting forward our own thoughts, our own histories to be shared with others, and to challenge those normative powers that want to steal our voices (Hurlbert 2013, 24–25); he defends writing as a healing therapy that enables the silenced voices from all over the world to be listened to (Hurlbert 2013, 176). O'Beirne's autobiography is not only a way of telling the truth and of seeking justice but also an attempt to heal her wounds. Overall, all these survivors who made their story public grew resilient against the silencing attitude of the Church, the state and society fighting to recuperate their voices and identities and to achieve justice and compensation.

Resilience is defined in Trauma Studies as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma or threat using external and internal resources available (The American Psychological Association 1892). Yates et al. on the one hand and Pasteur on the other pinpoint the importance of the context—family, community, government—in the process of reducing vulnerability and of increasing resilience (2015). In my case study, the concealing attitude of the Church, the State and of the whole society amounted to the silencing of these women. These women were not provided with any support, so they concealed their past. As an example of this disengagement from the victims, when O'Beirne started tracking her past and those responsible for allowing this to happen she asked for her

records in the Magdalene Laundry, but they said they had been damaged in a fire (O’Beirne 2005, 190). In 1993, the exhumation of 133 Magdalenes’ bodies from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge’s Asylum received media attention, so she decided to continue with her project. She wrote to Mary Robinson—president of Ireland from 1990 to 1997—to meet her, but she refused. Since she, together with other Magdalenes, was helped neither by the State nor by the Church, she launched a campaign to help those who were still institutionalised. Furthermore, she decided to do something for those women who had died—she was determined to give them dignity by improving the conditions of Dublin’s Glasnevin cemetery, by removing the headstones in which the word sinner or penitent was written and, by building a proper memorial for them (O’Beirne 2005, 193). In 2004 she managed to meet Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and the newspapers *The Sunday Times* and *The Irish Independent* covered the news (O’Beirne, 205). She was promised help in her petition and was referred to Phil Garland, the head of the Child Protection Service of the Archdiocese of Dublin. In the meantime, she received anonymous calls that threatened her and obliged her to be silent (O’Beirne 2005, 204–206). This last episode makes clear the conspiracy of silence that existed in Ireland at a time when revealing the truth about reformatory institutions would damage the whole country. Seeing that she was not achieving anything, she decided to go on a hunger strike ignoring her friends, her family and the Archbishop’s recommendations. It was only then that the media took interest in her (O’Beirne 2005, 207).

According to Butler, “those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanised, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all” (Butler 2006, 141). Some Magdalene survivors like O’Beirne found that representation and humanisation thanks to the media. Her appearance in the public sphere implied her recognition in society and the restoration of her dismissed voice. Contrary to Ahiska’s idea that media representation of women’s vulnerability and violence against them produces anonymity, fixation of vulnerability, homogenisation and normalisation, I believe the media representation of Magdalene women and what they suffered contributed to the recognition of these women’s individual identities and stories (2016, 213). Even though a complete healing of O’Beirne’s wounds will probably never be achieved,

as she herself claims, a partial restoration has been granted thanks to the recognition of her identity.

Despite the mental and physical difficulties O’Beirne found after her confinement, such as health problems, learning difficulties and in showing emotions for her children, difficulty in trusting others—specially men—panic attacks, anxiety and so on, she grew resilient and developed different techniques to overcome the trauma and live a normal life. The mere fact of speaking up and pointing out the perpetrators should be considered an act of resilience against all the damage she has suffered and against all those who intend to silence her. By speaking up and tracking her past, she fights against the derealisation and dehumanisation she has been suffering throughout her life. The survivors’ recognition of their own vulnerability has been the first step towards their restitution. Thanks to the public recognition of survivors like O’Beirne another step has been taken in the process towards overcoming their trauma.

The next step in the unveiling of this historical event has been the prosecution of the perpetrators thanks to the victims’ public accusation. Throughout her narrative O’Beirne accuses the Church, society and the State as those responsible for her misfortune. According to psychoanalysts, different responses to trauma (taking revenge, forgetting, crying, or keeping silent) are common to any traumatised person. Once the government, Church and society are identified as the perpetrators, they are also made responsible for these women’s restoration. These groups became witnesses of these women’s traumas and an ethical demand on the witnesses is made by the Magdalene survivor to help her (Laub 1995, 69). In this process towards healing, Herman claims that the attitude of the community is of paramount importance in the restitution of the victims of trauma (1998, 70).

Irish society seems to have been involved, offering the traumatised recognition and restitution and taking part in several demonstrations organised by the victims. The State initially turned its back on these women by negating their collaboration with the Church as the McAleese Report states (2013). Yet, the State finally offered an apology and a compensation scheme to victims in 2013. Mentioning the State’s apology, some survivors appreciate it and consider it an act of recognition. However, others like Kathy O’Beirne believe it changed nothing: “... Money will never heal the scars that I have inside or make me feel clean. I don’t think it’s possible to put a price on what was done to me during

my childhood, and so receiving a pay-out will never be an answer, but at the time it felt like this was the only way forward” (2005, 198–199).

Finally, the Church still seems to be reluctant to accept their blame and to offer these women help. Some newspapers like *BBC News* sought some members of the Church to claim accountability, but their response was clear; they still deny their involvement in Magdalene Laundries and refuse to compensate the victims (Roberts). In 2017, the Archbishop Michael Neary of the Tuam Diocese declared to *The Irish Daily Mirror*: “as we did not have any involvement in the running of the home, I have no specific information on the manner of interments” (Fogarty 2017). Before that, *We.News* made an appointment in 2013 with some nuns² who refused their involvement in this issue and even found it unnecessary to apologise for it (McCormack 2013). According to Herman, the main stages of recovery from trauma are “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivor and the community” (Herman 1998, 3). Restoration and restitution of the victim are only possible by the acknowledgement of the damage caused to them and by acting (Herman 1998, 70). Applying this theory to Magdalene survivors, these women were unable to overcome their trauma since they did not receive that. Eleven years later, when O’Beirne still has not achieved her goal as stated in the prologue, this book is a call for action to all those who may bear witness to her testimony:

So please, Lord. Help all those busy people who only think of themselves to stop, look, listen and think. Five minutes of kindness can mean one day of happiness for someone who is suffering great pain and sadness or even save a life. If someone had given me the time and attention I needed then I could have been saved from the abuse and torment I suffered for years. And so many others could have been saved as well. (O’Beirne 2005, 189–190)

And to the State: “Perhaps if any of those mentioned read this book, they will think again and answer my letters. Perhaps someone will take an interest and try to help me. Perhaps the Government will do something to honour that apology they made six years ago” (O’Beirne 2005, 217). Speaking up about such a traumatic experience and challenging power institutions as O’Beirne does here is a courageous act not all victims have been capable of. In the testimonies discussed above we have seen how the community fostered among survivors encouraged them to speak;

however, O’Beirne was alone along the way. As we can gather from this quotation, this autobiography enables her to heal her wounds and claim justice. Overall, this autobiography is the testimony of a survivor who is claiming not only justice but also her own identity to be restored.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

From the eighteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth century, a culture of purity denied the existence of thousands of women in Ireland who did not follow the moral prescriptions of the Catholic Church. The derealisation of the “Other”, in this case based on moral and gender demands, caused the vulnerability of anyone who challenged the norm. The confinement of “deviant women” in Magdalene Laundries for their reform has been unveiled as a coercive system which subjugated “vulnerable” women. The testimonies of hundreds of survivors have revealed the corruption and abuse the Catholic Church, in conjunction with the State, carried out. According to Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay, the vulnerability of any human being is granted at his/her birth (Butler et al. 2016). Yet, Irish women became more vulnerable under this system of control and correction led by the Church. Employed as instruments of power, Magdalene Laundries rendered thousands of women in a vulnerable and precarious condition which they are still fighting to overcome.

These women’s resilient/resistant attitude during their confinement analysed in these testimonies proves the previous statement that their confinement was a repressive one rather than one of reform, as the clergy defended. Moreover, their resilient/resistant attitude challenging the nuns’ power after their detention seen in O’Beirne’s autobiography should prove their willingness to recover their lives even if it implies becoming more vulnerable. After their release, their resilient attitude speaking up and identifying the perpetrators led to more vulnerability by being in the public eye. Nevertheless, the recognition of their vulnerability has had the power to change the meaning of this word. That vulnerability they were relegated to has become a mobilising force for all those women who suffered the misfortune of resisting the Catholic Church. As Butler claims, we cannot destroy power, but we can resist it (2016, 14).

Nevertheless, the victims’ healing process is being hindered by the lack of recognition and action by the perpetrators as they have demanded. It was the organisation Justice for Magdalenes, together with other platforms such as Magdalene Survivors Together, and various kinds of

narratives which have granted the victims a safe space to talk about their traumatic experience in Magdalene Laundries. These two platforms I have analysed here—the Oral History Project and O’Beirne’s autobiography—have enabled the victims to recuperate their identities and voices at the same time they have encouraged them to grow resilient against the silence surrounding reformatory institutions. Through the analysis of these testimonies, I have proved that vulnerability is an ontological condition, as Butler claims, assigned by those who subjugated women through strict disciplinary measures. Moreover, I have confirmed that vulnerability can be resisted in that path towards healing the wounds caused by trauma when restitution and recognition are granted to the victims.

NOTES

1. Mother and Baby Homes were institutions founded to assist pregnant women in giving birth. After they got their babies, unmarried mothers were sent to Magdalene Asylums where pregnant women were not admitted (Finnegan 2004, 27).
2. Neither the nuns’ names nor the Laundry’s name was provided due to confidential reasons. What we know from the interview is that they used to work in a Laundry in Dublin.

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Becoming Resilient Subjects: Vulnerability and Resistance in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

María Elena Jaime de Pablos

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Irish-Canadian author Emma Donoghue describes *Room*,¹ her seventh novel, as “a universal story of parenthood and childhood” (Donoghue in Prospero 2010). It narrates the story of Ma, a 26-year-old woman who has been imprisoned for seven years in an eleven-by-eleven-foot soundproof garden shed in an unnamed place in America with her son, Jack, born out of sexual abuse and raised in this room up to the age of five. They are locked up, subjugated and humiliated by a man nicknamed Old Nick, their kidnapper, who feels entitled to do so because they are “things that belong to him, because Room does” (Donoghue 2010, 81). He forces them to live under precarious conditions: isolated in a confined space, provided with little food of poor nutritional value, insecure and subjected to violence. They become highly vulnerable human

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beings, Ma more than Jack as she is also a victim of verbal, psychological, physical and sexual abuse. But *Room* not only explores “the horror of life in captivity”, it also deals with “the uneasy transition back into the world after escape” (Lorenzi 2016, 19) due to external factors, such as excessive medical intervention and extremely sensationalist mass media coverage, and internal factors such as mental and emotional instability or lack of abilities to relate to other human beings.

Emma Donoghue conceived the story of *Room* shortly after the real-life case of Josef Fritzl emerged in Austria in 2008, when Elisabeth Fritzl revealed that she had been held captive for 24 years by her own father, Josef Fritzl, who had psychologically, physically and sexually abused her during her imprisonment in the basement of the family home in Amstetten, Austria. It also emerged that she had delivered seven children while in captivity. According to Mark Medley (2010), Donoghue was drawn to one of them, “Felix, the young boy who’d never seen the outside world [...]. The idea of a child, emerging into the modern world ‘as if he was a Martian, having heard things about the outside but never knowing it was fully real,’ inspired the novelist”. Medley (2010) adds that “Donoghue began writing *Room* in January 2009 after a period of research during which she explored subjects ranging from infanticide to dungeon construction to unassisted labour. Donoghue didn’t just read about kidnappings, but other examples of children raised in confined or traumatizing settings”.

The novel is divided into five chapters that represent Ma’s and Jack’s metamorphosis from captivity in Room to “freedom” in Outside: “Presents” (Jack celebrates his 5th birthday and describes life in Room), “Unlying” (Jack discovers there is a whole world to explore outside Room, he calls it Outside), “Dying” (Ma and Jack design a plan to trick Old Nick and carry out the “Great Escape”), “After” (Once in Outside, both Ma and Jack are provided with medical help and family support to adapt to a new life full of hardships) and “Living” (they try to overcome their fears and recover from what had been a curtailment for Jack and confinement for Ma and become real survivors).

This present chapter deals with the different types of abusive conditions in which Ma and Jack find themselves while they are first imprisoned in Room and later free in Outside, the devastating effects these have on their bodies and psyche, the different practices of resistance that they enact to cope with what Judith Butler calls “a disproportionate exposure to suffering” (2016, 25) and the transforming process they must undergo

to adapt to the different situations of oppression and confinement they face both in captivity and after escape.

Judith Butler's Theory of Vulnerability helps us understand how Emma Donoghue resorts to the notion of vulnerability in resistance to shape *Room* characters' subjectivity, Julia Kristeva's Theory of the Abject explains why Ma and Jack fall into the category of socially disturbing elements and are, consequently, confined, controlled and forced to accept the patriarchal symbolic order. I also draw from Boris Cyrulnik's Theory of Resilience to examine the process that the protagonists, psychologically wounded people, must undergo to overcome trauma, become whole again and achieve social integration. I have divided my analysis into two sections following the narrative development in the novel. The first deals with the situation in the confined space they know simply as "Room" and the second with their changed conditions in the world at large, or "Outside".

3.2 VIOLENCE, VULNERABILITY AND PARODIC RESISTANCE

Locked up, Jack and his mother depend on their captor, who controls the social and material conditions in which they live. If we understand vulnerability "as a deliberate exposure to power" (Butler 2016, 22), Jack and Ma are absolutely vulnerable, since they are confined, subjugated and threatened with food, water or power cuts by Old Nick, who forces them to live under the precarious conditions already mentioned. These conditions affect Ma more than they affect Jack for two reasons, first, she is fully aware of them and, second, violence in her case implies physical ill-treatment, sexual assault and psychological torture. Jack, the narrator of the story, does not witness how Old Nick exercises physical and/or sexual violence against Ma because when this predator is in Room, he is told to stay hidden in a wardrobe, but he can hear Old Nick tormenting his mother, as the following quotation illustrates. In it the captor sarcastically presents himself as a protective figure and Room as a kind of pleasant and safe sanctuary guarding its inmates from all the perils women must face in the world outside Room:

The first thing Old Nick says I don't hear.

“Mmm, sorry about that,” says Ma, “we had curry. I was wondering, actually, if there was any chance—” Her voice is all high. “If it might be possible sometime to put in an extractor fan or something?” [...]

“Huh, there’s an idea,” says Old Nick. “Let’s start all the neighbors wondering why I’m cooking up something spicy in my workshop.” [...]

“Oh. Sorry,” says Ma, “I didn’t think—”

“Why don’t I stick a flashing neon arrow on the roof while I’m at it?” [...]

“I’m really sorry,” says Ma, “I didn’t realize that the smell, that it, that a fan would—”

“I don’t think you appreciate how good you’ve got it here,” says Old Nick. “Do you?”

Ma doesn’t say anything.

“Above ground, natural light, central air, it’s a cut above some places, I can tell you. Fresh fruit, toiletries, what have you, click your fingers and it’s there. Plenty girls would thank their lucky stars for a setup like this, safe as houses. Specially with the kid—”

Is that me?

“No drunk drivers to worry about,” he says, “drug pushers, perverts ...” Ma butts in very fast. “I shouldn’t have asked for a fan, it was dumb of me, everything’s fine.”

“OK, then.” (Donoghue 2010, 69)

This piece of dominant masculinist narrative aims at taming Ma, at depriving her of her voice and agency—and consequently of her subjectivity—and at establishing a clear power relation based on possession—by resorting to terror and by stressing Ma’s situation of dependency. Although Ma is deeply affected by Jack’s induced confinement and abuse, she resists Old Nick’s destructive power by simply staying alive, as Butler says: “under certain conditions, continuing to exist, to move, and to breathe are forms of resistance” (Butler 2016, 26) and by changing her tactic. After having struggled against her predator for years before Jack is born, once she becomes a mother, Ma strategically decides to play the role of the acquiescent “Stepford wife”² (Donoghue 2010, 233), that is that of the submissive automaton subjected to a condition of *sexual slave*, *always* ready to respond to the demands of her despotic master. However, she never stops mentally rejecting her captor’s control and actively thinking about a strategy to escape it.

Ma’s bodily exposure aims at lessening the effects that Old Nick’s violence can discharge upon them, so they can survive longer and ameliorate their living conditions. Here, vulnerability can be seen as part of her

own exercise of power, thus, “resistance appears as the effect of power, as part of power, its self-subversion” (Butler 1997, 93). In this relation of power and parodic resistance, subversion on the part of Ma must be restricted to the imaginary, since resistance—organically linked to death—is interpreted by the power from which it originates as “‘death drive’, ‘madness’, ‘anarchism’, and finally ‘destructive’” (Samaddar 2010, 137), that is, as potentially disruptive of the symbolic order, the “register of regulatory ideality” (Butler 1993: 18), as established by the power.

Ma’s exposure to continuous suffering by her captor rapist is devastating her to such an extent that she requires regular medication to deal with it, and when this is not enough to relieve her physical pain and mental anguish, she stays in bed for a whole day totally disconnected from life—or “Gone”, with a capital letter, as Jack calls it. Ma then goes through what the internationally renowned psychologist Boris Cyrulnik calls a “psychic near-death experience” (2010, 36). Confinement and abuse erode Ma’s sense of identity, she becomes a split subject, a divided ego with two parts: “the transparent, social part of it, which is often cheerful, masks a darker part that is both secret and shameful” (Cyrulnik 2009, 176).

Although Ma is deeply psychologically wounded, she makes titanic efforts to create a magical world in Room for Jack, who perceives the locked, soundproof, isolated and terribly small shed as a “nice and warm” space (Donoghue 2010, 8) where he and his mother have “thousands of things to do” (Donoghue 2010, 8). His mother constantly stimulates him to carry out both physical and mental exercises. The “socio-emotional and cognitive development” that Boris Cyrulnik states as essential for proper self-realization (2010, 148) is partly achieved. Although he cannot experiment a socialising process among other children and adults, he enjoys his childhood while learning to behave as an “ethical subject” loving and respecting his mother, caring for all the living creatures that also inhabit Room—a plant, a mouse and a spider—and all the objects in it, developing moral rules and following guidelines for proper conduct.

He is always inspired by his mother, an intelligent woman, a caring mother, a proper figure of attachment, a source of affection and a model of principled behaviour. Jack believes himself to be “the dead spit of” Ma (Donoghue 2010, 7), not only like her, but a part of his mother, since they are fully connected with each other on a physical, mental and emotional level. The mother–child bond is so strong that Jack cannot perceive any real boundaries between them. The unity that Ma and Jack

represent is physically manifested through breastfeeding; he loves this intimate connection to his mother's body even at the age of five.

Jack adores Ma, a god-like figure.³ She seems to know everything and satisfy his curiosity by answering all his questions. Ma not only provides him with an education in an entertaining way, but also explains important aspects of life to him through tales and stories he can easily understand like “Dylan the Digger”, “Baby Jesus”, “Ginger Jack”, “Jack the Giant Killer”, *Alice in Wonderland*, “The Mermaid”, etc. Through these stories, the boy has access to knowledge and truth, although, as she says, “A different kind of true” (Donoghue 2010, 71). At the age of five, the boy has the impression that he knows everything he needs to understand his world.

Ma transmits him human values that he can understand and embrace, she does a myriad of things to make him happy, she devotes her full attention to him, she provides him with constant love and care and she makes him feel useful, powerful and unique. Jack is induced to thinking that he is a hero with “superpowers”, “Super Prince JackerJack” (Donoghue 2010, 135) who, noble, pure, mentally strong and brave, is meant, he himself says, to kill evil ones (Donoghue 2010, 54) like Old Nick in order to protect and save the good ones like his own mother. Jack indeed saves Ma from despair by giving her a reason to live. As Miriam Borham-Puyol affirms, maternity “enables Ma to develop a stronger will to survive her confinement and torture. Maternity gives purpose to her life, which had lost all meaning in the midst of her traumatic experience” (2020, 79).

From the very moment Jack is born, Ma constitutes her subjectivity as a mother, the very act of renaming herself as Ma—concealing her real name from Jack—implies an act of resistance that lets her imagine herself an agentive and powerful subject rather than a passive and powerless object of sexual exploitation. Indeed, thanks to the loving bond that she creates with her son, using Sarah Bracke's expression, Ma is able to “endlessly bend [...] without breaking” (2016, 66).

To keep Jack safe in the protective bubble she has created for him, Ma prevents Old Nick from seeing, talking or interacting with Jack and avoids talking to Jack about Old Nick so that he cannot become “realer” in his mind (Donoghue 2010, 18). This terrifying, but somehow not totally real element for Jack, never haunts the boy; Ma is ready to keep acquiescent and submit herself to bodily exposure as long as Old Nick does not relate to Jack. She also tells Jack that everything outside Room, except Old Nick, is not real, that all they can touch is real, but that all they like but

cannot have is fantasy. That is, people, animals or things that appear on TV are not real (Donoghue 2010, 20); this way, the boy does not really long for anything he cannot have access to.

He is happy with the few elements available in Room. He does not feel isolated because he imagines that his world is populated by many other beings, some with human shapes that can be found in books and on TV—Dora the Explorer, Baby Jesus, Alice in Wonderland, Dylan the Digger—and some with non-human shapes that cohabit Room—Tooth (a tooth from his mother), Rug, Bed, Wall, Eggsnake, Sink, Wardrobe, Wonky Chair, Meltedy Spoon, Spider, Mouse and Plant, among others. To all are given capital letters to stress their value and uniqueness. Whether fantastic or real, he attributes all of them human features maintaining with each a special relation by talking and interacting with them. As Libe García Zarranz states by “personifying the objects in Room, Jack grants them a sense of material agency, while simultaneously depicting the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman world as porous” (2017, 49).

As Ma wants the world they inhabit to be cohesive and meaningful, to follow some kind of logic and purpose, she builds it on a solid, highly organised and structured base. She not only establishes the rules both must comply with, but also the activities they have to accomplish to create a routine according to the time and day of the week: Monday is laundry day, Friday is Mattress time, Sunday is the day on which they get a “Sundaytreat” (they get something extra that they like or need), etc.

In their daily routine, they devote some time to creativity playing with toys, reading, storytelling, singing, drawing, stringing eggshells together with a needle to make a kind of snake that they name Eggsnake, etc. They also invent “word sandwiches” such as “scave”—denoting that someone is scary and brave—or “coolary”—indicating that something is cool and scary. No doubt, Ma tries “to make the room as creative a space as possible” (Donoghue in Marcus 2016). Due to Ma’s educational strategies, Jack is capable of performing many tasks which help preserve his physical and mental health in the precarious life conditions they face: he knows how to do the laundry, to organise his meals, to sew, to water plants, to entertain himself, etc. and he carries out all these activities on his own when Ma is “Gone”.

He enjoys life in Room, “a big womb, the space in many ways a true extension of a mother’s body, a limited area of total closeness and care” (Bender 2010). It is the only place he knows, and in it, he has a coherent

sense of selfhood. In fact, the only thing that the child really fears is Old Nick separating him from his mother—thus breaking the bond between them—as some kind of punitive action.

Despite Ma's efforts to provide Jack with a joyful and healthy environment, despite trying to conceal the physical, psychological and sexual damage that Old Nick imprints on her and hiding Jack from Old Nick's sight to make her son's life more bearable, captivity also leaves its mark on the boy. From a psychological point of view, confinement has "undeniably shaped Jack's perspective of the world, including his sense of reality. [...] Jack has difficulty understanding the relationship between his own existence and those of the people he sees on television" (Lorenzi 2016, 23). From a physical viewpoint, Jack's physical development is retarded due to the lack of space, sun and fresh air and a poor diet. On his 5th birthday, he is only 3 feet and 3 inches (approx. 99 cm) tall. The child is so extraordinarily small that when Old Nick sees him by chance, he pejoratively describes the boy as "a basket case" (Donoghue 2010, 74). Butler says that "the body is less an entity than a relation, and it cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living" (2016, 19).

Conditions of living in Room become extremely unbearable after a brief episode of insurgency during which Ma asks Old Nick for vitamins and a better diet—an act of resistance to their conditions of austerity. The captor, wielding his disciplinary power, stops providing them with any food or electricity for days. Ma, fearing that both would die in Room, decides to tell Jack the truth about their situation of confinement and of Old Nick's perverse nature. This way the boy can confirm something he had previously guessed: that their night visitor is "not human like [...them]" (Donoghue 2010, 18), that he is the source of Ma's suffering and that his idealised Room is also a prison. She also reveals to him that Room is not the real world, but Outside—America—a place full of wonders and enjoyment where people can be free. Ma wants Jack to understand the need to leave Room, the place he loves and knows so well, which creates some confusion in the boy's mind.

Ma tries to convince him about the urgency to achieve freedom and both design a plan to escape from Room. They call it "The Great Scape". Jack, as brave and powerful as Super Prince JackerJack, has the leading role (Donoghue 2010, 135), possessing in Ma's opinion special capacities and skills to undertake bold actions which will save them from both captivity and eventual death. According to the escape plan, Jack must

pretend to be ill and then dead, so Old Nick takes him out of Room to bury him. Once on Old Nick's truck, he must jump from it, find a police officer and tell him about Room to save himself and Ma. As the ultimate strategy of resistance, Ma exposes Jack to real danger, to fear of the unknown, to detachment from the person he loves and depends on to save him from the horror she anticipates is to take place in Room. Jack follows the plan as designed and with a third person's help ends up at a police station unfolding, in his own terms, his and Ma's story. Thanks to his agency, Ma can be rescued from Room.

3.3 RESILIENCE, NORMALCY AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

As Marisol Morales Ladrón states: "Their escape, which marks the ending of their nightmare, is only apparent since they will now have to face the no less stressful experience of adapting to society and of being accepted by it. Jack's first contact with the 'real' world is, consequently, more traumatic than his incarceration" (2017, 89). As soon as Jack is in Outside, i.e. outside Room, he experiences a sense of displacement and a crisis of identity: "I'm not in Room, Am I still me?" (Donoghue 2010, 138), he wonders. Besides, social interaction proves to be difficult for him. He and his mother, "Roomers", communicate in a way and display a behaviour pattern that is not shared by other people in America, "Outsiders". "Outsiders are not like us" (Donoghue 2010, 264), "Outsiders don't understand anything" (Donoghue 2010, 152), he thinks.

These "Outsiders" consider Ma and Jack as damaged people who need physical and mental "reparation" before they are socially integrated. In Kristevan fashion, we could say that "Outsiders" regard "Roomers" as abject people,⁴ for this reason, the former force the latter to undergo a process by which these can become "normal" or normative subjects according to the American symbolic order. This explains why Jack and his mother are taken from Room to Room Number 7 at Cumberland Clinic, a psychiatric centre for people who are, Ma clarifies to Jack, "a bit sick in the head, but not very. They can't sleep maybe from worrying, or they can't eat, or they wash their hands too much. [...] some of them have hit their heads and don't know themselves anymore, and some are sad all the time or scratch their arms with knives even, I don't know why" (Donoghue 2010, 191). At this psychiatric centre, they are no longer under the authoritarian control of Old Nick but under the continuous

control of a team of doctors—a psychiatrist, a neurologist, a psychotherapist, a nutritionist, a dentist, etc.—who represent a kind of paternalistic form of power aiming at institutionalising normalcy. This medical team is meant to assess the physical and mental damage inflicted upon Ma and Jack during their stay in Room, to make the proper diagnosis and, finally, to guide or monitor them in the healing process towards eventual normalcy—resilience—and social reintegration. At this stage of the narration, Ma and Jack are fully pathologised subjects.

After medical examination, Dr. Clay determines that Jack is “a newborn” suffering from separation anxiety, in need of social adjustment, sensory modulation and proper spatial perception and that Ma is a patient that suffers from insomnia, tachycardia, depersonalization, *jamais vu*, cognitive distortions and re-experiencing. He wants them to stay at the psychiatric centre, a panoptic institution,⁵ for “*continuity and therapeutic isolation*” (Donoghue 2010, 253). Once again, they are confined and isolated, and, once again, they are told that this is so for their own good. This discourse of protection accompanied by close surveillance—as they also become objects of scientific study—limits Ma’s and Jack’s agency, thus reducing their possibility to feel free, safe and whole. Not surprisingly, Jack asks Ma if they are really “free” at the clinic.

Ma’s and Jack’s sense of being sick, damaged, odd or abject is enhanced by mass media offering negative or sensational descriptions of them both. In the first piece of TV news that Jack has access to, shortly after he and his mother are released, they are portrayed as degraded, deformed and idiotic beings:

LOCAL NEWS AS IT HAPPENS. [...]“... bachelor loner converted the garden shed into an impregnable twenty-first-century dungeon. The despot’s victims have an eerie pallor and appear to be in a borderline catatonic state after the long nightmare of their incarceration.” *There’s when Officer Oh tried to put the blanket on my head and I don’t let her. The invisible voice says,* “The malnourished boy, unable to walk, is seen here lashing out convulsively at one of his rescuers.” (Donoghue 2010, 165)

Later on, Jack reads a newspaper article in which he is compared to a little monkey in terms of physical and intellectual capacities: “Jack says everything is ‘nice’ and adores Easter eggs but still goes up and down stairs on all fours like a monkey. He was sealed up for all his five years in a rotting cork-lined dungeon, and experts cannot yet say what kind

or degree of long-term developmental retardation—” (Donoghue 2010, 216). This article, entitled “*HOPE FOR BONSAI BOY*”, also makes reference to the limited space in which he was raised and its negative effect upon the child’s size (Donoghue 2010, 215). Ma detests media employing hate speech to constitute Jack through discursive means as “a freak, or an idiot savant, or feral” (Donoghue 2010, 236). Some reporters prefer to deal with him at a symbolic level; consequently, their discursive productions are of a different nature, for them “Jack’s the child sacrifice [...] cemented into the foundations to placate the spirits” (Donoghue 2010, 293) or a creature whose archetypal reference is Perseus “born to a walled-up virgin, set adrift in a wooden box, the victim who returns as hero” (Donoghue 2010, 294).

Ma abominates these descriptions as much as she dislikes the reverential labels she sometimes receives: “a beacon of hope”, “an angel” and “a talisman of goodness” (Donoghue 2010, 235). To counteract this Madonna-like image, she openly confesses—as an act of resistance to media subject formation—that she is “not a saint” (Donoghue 2010, 235) in a TV interview that she accepts with a twofold purpose, to obtain funds for Jack’s future needs and to tell the truth about their captivity in Room in order to put an end to fake and sensational news spread in relation to it. Ma feels intensely trapped when taking part in this interview because it includes a series of what she considers to be “stupid questions” that address superficial and morbid aspects of their confinement and a terrible accusation, she has not been the strong, loving, protective, altruistic and self-sacrificial mother that the patriarchal symbolic order expects a female progenitor to be. According to the female interviewer with an essentialised notion of motherhood, Ma should have asked Old Nick to give Jack up in adoption so the child could have enjoyed a “normal, happy childhood with a loving family”; this way implying that Jack has been neither happy nor loved in Room and that not only Old Nick but Ma is to blame for Jack’s physical, mental and emotional disabilities. This is an extraordinary example of how people may undergo “linguistic vulnerability”⁶:

[...] “Heaven forbid. But did you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away?”

“Away?”

“To leave him outside a hospital, say, so he could be adopted. As you yourself were, very happily, I believe.”

I can see Ma swallow. “Why would I have done that?” “Well, so he could be free.”

“Free away from me?”

“It would have been a sacrifice, of course –the ultimate sacrifice– but if Jack could have had a normal, happy childhood with a loving family?”

“He had me.” Ma says it one word at a time. “He had a childhood with me, whether you’d call it *normal* or not.”

“But you knew what he was missing,” says the woman. “Every day he needed a wider world, and the only one you could give him got narrower. You must have been tortured by the memory of everything Jack didn’t even know to want. Friends, school, grass, swimming, rides at the fair ...”

[...]

Ma’s got tears coming down her face, she puts up her hands to catch them. [...]” (Donoghue 2010, 237–238)

The fact that Ma ends up crying at this point of the interview clearly illustrates the wounding power words may have and that “We do not only act through the speech act; speech acts also act on us” (Butler 2016, 16). Resorting to Butler’s Theory of Language, we may state that the interviewer’s words imply some “performative” practice by which Ma is resignified from the Madonna-like mother to the irresponsible, egocentric woman. This injurious address provokes in Ma such a degree of anxiety and discomfort that she psychologically collapses, thus revealing her vulnerability to the interviewer’s dominant position and discourse. This episode has detrimental consequences, as some hours later Ma tries to commit suicide by taking an overdose of tranquilisers. As Lucia Lorenzi affirms:

By the end of the scene, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily Ma’s trauma that pushes her to the point of emotional breakdown, but rather the trauma induced by the interviewer’s violent attempts to shape, control, and manipulate Ma’s narrative. As Donoghue’s novel makes clear in this scene in particular, it is not only perpetrators or perpetrator narratives that can enact violence against victims’ stories and subjectivities, but also those who have other forms of narrative control and power, such as the media who enact a kind of public violence. (Lorenzi 2016, 30)

Mass media—as represented in *Room*—manipulate information linked to Ma and Jack’s story to create a sensational narration that may be appealing to the audience but that does not necessarily correspond to facts. Media have the power not only to construct a parallel reality by

de-contextualising and recontextualising data, but also to form subjects through injurious interpellation or to resignify words, categories and names in order to achieve their intended goals. TV shows and newspaper articles exploit their image and their tragedy to gain audience or readership, and paparazzi—“vultures with their cameras and microphones” (Donoghue 2010, 191)—constantly chase them to steal pictures of them and obtain an economic benefit. By acting this way, by presenting Ma and Jack as abject beings, mass media are contributing to Ma’s and Jack’s sense of vulnerability, magnifying their suffering and, at the same time, hindering their social reintegration. Fully aware of the potential destructive power of the media, Ma tries to protect Jack from them in the same way she protected him from Old Nick—she does not want them to approach or see him.

At this point of the novel, Jack inhabits a world that he perceives as alien and disorganised. He realises that he does not like people looking at him or touching him, that he is afraid of loud sounds, that rain scares him or that he cannot stand new smells. Frightened, insecure, treated as a freak, totally disoriented, Jack suffers from sleep disorders, nightmares, eating disorders, identity problems and confusion. And the worst thing, Ma, always strong, always wise in Room, also finds herself out of place in Outside, traumatised by Old Nick in Room and stigmatised by mass media in Outside, she finds herself, in Cyrulnik’s terms, having to “choose between annihilation and fighting” (2010, 100), death and survival.

Doctors at the Cumberland Clinic prescribe Ma and Jack drugs, habits and norms to foster their transformation from “abject” to “normal” subjects, from damaged to resilient subjects. Resilience, in clinical terms, is defined as the “capacity to recover after shock [...by] returning to a prior state” (Gerard Bouchard in Bracke 2016, 55) or the capacity to “control damage and reverse it” (Bracke 2016, 56), but self-blame, shame, fear and confusion make resilience—and the task of social integration—difficult for them both.

According to Cyrulnik, a leading proponent of the Theory of Resilience, three conditions must be given to achieve it: “Bond, function, and meaning”, or in other words, “loving, working, and historicizing” (2010, 51). As the whole story is narrated by Jack, readers can observe the way these three conditions operate better in his case than in Ma’s. While Ma is at Cumberland Clinic trying to physically and psychologically recover from her suicide attempt, Jack explores Outside with Ma’s relatives, mainly with Grandma and her new husband, Leo, who helps him

to understand it. These adults also provide him with love and protection; they represent, in Butler's terms, the "network of support and sustenance" (Butler 2016, 21) that he needs to assimilate and overcome separation from Ma (a most traumatic situation for him). He is also highly active playing games, visiting places, relating to new people, etc. He is also able to narrate his story in a very open and natural way, what has happened to Ma and him in the past and its consequences in the present: "I'm from somewhere else [...] Old Nick kept me and Ma locked up and he's in jail now with his truck but the angel won't burst him out because he's a bad guy. We're famous and if you take our picture we'll kill you" (Donoghue 2010, 247).

As he wants to be understood and accepted by people in *Outside*, he tries to assimilate and reproduce the norms and conventions—the latter defined by Ma as "silly habit[s] everybody has" (Donoghue 2010, 222)—that rule their social behaviour. Although these norms and conventions are relevant because, as Butler argues, they take hold of people in a deep and abiding way (2016, 17); Jack's natural method of reasoning finds it difficult to learn them because they are grounded on cultural arbitrariness: "There's too many rules to fit in my head" (Donoghue 2010, 274), he complains. In his exploration of *Outside*, he also discovers that people live in a world of clear-cut categories, where that of gender is of utmost relevance. Jack infers that bodies are gendered-marked—thus deducing the "link between corporeality and subjectivity" (Sabsay 2016, 288)—and noticing that his body is constantly mistaken for that of a girl's due to his long ponytail, he gets a pair of scissors and cuts it all off. With this performative act, Jack is conforming to a gender norm so as not to be called a freak. He, who had enjoyed a natural symbolic order structured by the law of his mother (protective god-like figure) in *Room*, tries now to adapt to the normative and oppressive symbolic order as structured by the "Law of the Father" in *Outside*.

Outside, Jack concludes, is not the promised land that Ma had described in *Room*: "Ma said we'd be free but this doesn't feel free" (Donoghue 2010, 257), but quite the opposite, "*Outside* is the scary" (Donoghue 2010, 219). Emma Donoghue, no doubt, resorts to Jack's personal crisis in a world he logically finds oppressive to reveal its flaws. As Said contends, the representation of crisis as a phenomenon "leads to criticism of the status quo" (1983, 232). In this vein, for instance, Jack—and Emma Donoghue herself⁷—is particularly concerned with the way adults treat children, by paying special attention to boys and girls who are

deprived of affection and/or care by their own parents and, in contrast, adding value to the privileged relationship he maintains with his mother. He—and, obviously, the author—is denouncing that in Outside—the United States of America or any other country similarly developed—children may be deprived of the basic elements they need to feel happy and safe, to develop skills and to gain self-confidence, love, attention and respect:

Also everywhere I'm looking at kids, adults mostly don't seem to like them, not even the parents do. They call the kids gorgeous and so cute, they make the kids do the thing all over again so they can take a photo, but they don't want to actually play with them, they'd rather drink coffee talking to other adults. Sometimes there's a small kid crying and the Ma of it doesn't even hear. (Donoghue 2010, 287)

Jack suffers a substantial transformation adapting to a new reality, but also adapting to a new relationship with Ma, who has also changed in Outside. When Jack's mother leaves the clinic, they both move to an apartment in an "Independent Living Residential Facility" (Donoghue 2010, 301). This apartment represents a fresh start and—as the very name of the living community suggests—an independent type of life. This new home is linked to new rules: no more breastfeeding, no more Tooth sucking and no more sharing the same room—they are to have "a room of their own" in clear reference to Virginia Woolf's famous essay. Donoghue states in an interview that, although *Room* celebrates mother-love, Ma has to recognise that sometimes "love takes the form of stepping back, letting go" (Donoghue in Prospero 2010).

The new rules serve a purpose, establishing some kind of boundary between them so that they can achieve some degree of autonomy. Ma also sets new trials to force their mind open to a whole new world: "We are going to try everything one time so we know what we like" (Donoghue 2010, 311). They want to enjoy themselves by discovering the pleasures that life may offer them, but to achieve this goal they need to rearticulate themselves as subjects; this implies that they must be brave, accept changes and prepare themselves to face hard-to-accomplish challenges such as:

[...] there's things we might try when we're braver.
Going up in an airplane

Having some of Ma's old friends over for dinner Driving a car
Going to the North Pole
Going to school (me) and college (Ma)
Finding our really own apartment that's not an Independent
Living Inventing something making new friends living in another country
not America Having a playdate at another kid's house like Baby Jesus and
John the Baptist Taking swimming lessons Ma going out dancing in the
night and me staying at Steppa and Grandma's on the blow-up. Having jobs
Going to the moon
 Most important there's *getting a dog called Lucky* [...]. (Donoghue
 2010, 312–313)

Split subjects—psychologically wounded people—need to overcome their traumas to knit themselves and become whole again. For this purpose, three weeks after leaving Room, Jack and Ma visit it. It is raining, both Ma and Jack are utterly frightened; Ma is afraid of Room and Jack of raining, but both hold hands and bravely head for the shed. Jack is to learn two important lessons, i.e. that rain does not hurt and that Room is “all wrong”, small, empty and smelly (Donoghue 2010, 319). It totally disappoints him and, as a consequence, he stops idealising it: “Nothing says anything to me” (Donoghue 2010, 319), “It’s not Room now” (Donoghue 2010, 320). This visit clearly convinces Jack that there is no way back; Jack and his mother are determined to start a new life. In the last lines of the novel, Emma Donoghue portrays mother and child together backing each other to conquer their respective fears and emerge, using Cyrulnik’s terminology, triumphant from their ordeal to find their “place in the human adventure” (2010, 168). They are now, no doubt, on the way to constitute their new subjectivity thanks to their ability to evolve and adapt to their new reality. By doing so, they can envisage the possibility of a life that can be not only “livable” but enjoyable.

3.4 CONCLUSIONS

In *Room*, Emma Donoghue represents human vulnerability through Ma and Jack, who experience the horrors of life in captivity—appalling precarious conditions, extreme violence, total dependency, isolation and destructive power. However, far from depicting them as passive victims of Old Nick’s inhuman ill-treatment, the author describes them as agentive

designers of strategies to cope with it in order to survive. These vary from bodily exposure, silence, split subjectivity, artistic creativity, daily routines or parodic resistance to the invention of a magic—but cohesive and meaningful—parallel world.

Although Donoghue does not hide the devastating effects that confinement and continuous abusive power on the part of Old Nick have on the mental and physical health of Ma and Jack, she rather focuses on the formidable bond that mother—a god-like figure—and child—a redemptive Jesus-like figure—establish. This is not only portrayed as a source of protection, happiness and affection, but also as a source of knowledge and moral and ethical values.

Their lives threatened, scaping from Room is the ultimate strategy of resistance. Unfortunately, against all odds, Outside proves to be also a repressive, violent and controlling space where they cannot fit. Physically and psychologically damaged, they are regarded as abject people who need to undergo a healing—transforming—process to become resilient subjects before they are socially accepted. Therapeutic isolation and close surveillance prescribed for them at Cumberland Clinic reduce their possibilities to feel free, safe and whole.

Mass media, the fourth power, also contribute to Ma's and Jack's perception of being constantly monitored, judged and rejected by issuing a series of news that offer a distorted image of them and by addressing them injurious speech. Traumatized by Old Nick, pathologized by Cumberland Clinic doctors and stigmatized by mass media, at the end of the novel, Ma and Jack try to control damage and reverse it in order to conquer paralyzing fears, to achieve a greater degree of autonomy, to create a more coherent and satisfactory sense of selfhood, to enjoy inter-personal relationships or to explore new personal and geographical territories.

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NOTES

1. Shortly after its release in 2010, it became an international bestseller and winner of prestigious literary awards such as the Canada and Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Fiction, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, the Governor General's Award, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the New York Times Best Book of the Year, the International Dublin Literary Award, etc. The film version (2015), directed by Lenny Abrahamson with screenplay by *Emma Donoghue* was equally successful.
2. In reference to Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972).
3. Emma Donoghue states: "Room is a peculiar (and no doubt heretical) battle between Mary and the Devil for young Jesus. If God sounds absent from that triangle, that's because I think for a small child God's love is represented, and proved, by mother-love" (Donoghue in Prospero 2010).
4. According to Julia Kristeva, abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 4).
5. Panoptic institutions, affirms Michel Foucault, "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1995, 201). Through disciplinary mechanisms, these institutions produce "subjected and practised bodies, 'docile bodies'" (Foucault 1995, 138).
6. Judith Butler explains in relation to linguistic vulnerability that "who we are, even our ability to survive, depends on the language that sustains us. One clear dimension of our vulnerability has to do with our exposure to name-calling and discursive categories in infancy and childhood –indeed, throughout the course of our life. All of us are called names, and this kind of name-calling demonstrates an important dimension of the speech act" (Butler 2016, 16).
7. In an interview with Wendy Smith carried out in 2016, Emma Donoghue stated that her "thoughts [...had] tended to hinge on parents and children" (Smith 2016, 65) for ten years.

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Of Mice and Women: Gendered and Speciesist Violence in Joyce Carol Oates's 'Martyrdom'

Maria Sofia Pimentel-Biscaia

4.1 GENDERED AND NON-HUMAN MARTYRDOM

Olga Camacho was 7 years old when in 1938 she was raped and murdered in Tijuana by a 24-year-old soldier, Juan “Soldado”. Today, Soldado is worshipped in both Mexico and the United States as a martyr and the patron saint of undocumented migrants. The girl’s murder has been almost entirely erased from memory as Soldado became a symbol of military injustice and a valuable spiritual asset when migrating to the neighbouring, more prosperous country. The martyrdom of a young child, a female, is obliterated (and therefore also her agony and cruel death) in the face of hegemonic paradigms related to patriarchal and

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nationalistic values. A critical reflection on the foundations of martyrdom seems therefore required.

This chapter has a threefold dimension: the use of a theory of embodied and engendered martyrdom; the discussion of racialised heteronormative relationships and their institutionalised role in the process of nation-building; the intersectional debate which additionally includes the animal question. To this end, I will focus on “Martyrdom” by Joyce Carol Oates, a brutal allegory of marriage where the cruel husband, Mr. X, abuses his younger, pretty wife, Babygirl, by neglecting, beating, prostituting and, in the end, raping her with a live rat, He. The rat and the woman become martyrs, with their utter suffering polyphonically described by them. I will suggest that a biopolitical approach to gendered violence and to the instrumentalisation of animal bodies reveals systemic violence which is exerted over subaltern subjectivities. Neither the woman’s nor the rat’s grief seems worthy of recognition and therefore the healing potential of mourning is put at risk.¹ The theoretical structure sustaining and inspiring my reflections emerges from recent debates on vulnerability and its relation to resistance (Butler 2016). In this particular instance, a political exploration of the entanglements generated in the relationship between patriarchal violence and vulnerability will be taken into consideration. Judith Butler disentralls vulnerability from the disabling realm of passivity of the traditional gendered binarism. This chapter will rethink vulnerability in relation to agency and, therefore, to resistance and discuss whether political deconstruction can be organised by those oppressed by binary codes: feminine versus masculine and non-human animal versus human.

4.2 PRECARIOUS BODIES: RATS AND WOMEN

“To which Other do I respond ethically?”, asks Judith Butler in *Precarious Lives* (2004, 140). In “Martyrdom”, published in 1994 in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, Joyce Carol Oates suggests that women and non-human animals are the Others who demand such a response. Moreover, I argue, this response must take into consideration their embodied subjectivities and, in this case, their embodied subjectivities as martyrs. Michaela DeSousey et al. proffer a model of embodied martyrdom whereby the martyr is a socially contested space and a cultural object. They argue that the “body itself is a tool that serves as a marker of nationalism, religiosity,

and cultural traditions that reflect deeper claims about social worlds” (DeSousey 2008, 100). Their model is undoubtedly anthropocentric and presupposes agency, so it has limitations with respect to this discussion, but their understandings of the martyr and her/his body as producers of meaning and identity which frame sacrifice and death are productive. The authors admit that martyrdom might, in fact, not always be willed, but it must be perceived as such and in Oates’s short story the wife accepts the violence inherent in her marriage. Another point made by DeSousey et al. is that of the martyr’s reputational use and, therefore, of the ensuing creation of a public persona which in times of ideological and political unrest, stands for what is deemed right. The martyr is a composite of an abstract concept and a material object (though sometimes the absence of the body can be productive too, such in the case with Che Guevara). The decisions regarding representation and reputation thus create a narrative and memorialise the sacrifice which acquires discursive and affective value as well. This chapter will also address the core problem of the plea of the voiceless and unrecognised martyr whose sacrifice is ideologically positioned in terms of human animal and gender relations.

The story starts with the description of both bodies arriving into the world, bodies which seem to have somehow always been connected and which will finally meet in martyrdom as the rat forcibly re-enters a birth canal, this time, a human one:

A sleek tiny baby he was, palpitating with life and appetite and he emerged out of his mother’s birth canal, and perfectly formed: twenty miniature toes intact, and the near microscopic nails already sharp; pink-whorled tiny ears; the tiny nose quivering, already vigilant against danger. [...]. And the miniature teeth set in those jaws – needle sharp, and perfectly formed. (More of these teeth, soon.) And the quizzical curve of the tail, pink hairless, thin as a mere thread. (Oates 1994, 284)

At first, the readers might think this passage describes the birth of a human baby: the pinkness, the sweetness and the approach which is usually reserved for humans (counting fingers and toes, the perfection of body elements). But as they read through, it becomes obvious that the sweet perfection refers to body parts which are not typically human: twenty toes (not fingers and toes), the jaws and the tail. The rat’s birth follows Babygirl’s:

What a beautiful baby *she* was, Babygirl her loving parents called her [...] fated to be smothered with love, devoured with love, an American Babygirl placed with reverend fingers in her incubator. Peri-winkle blue eyes, fair silk-soft blond hair, perfect rosebud lips, tiny pug nose, uniform smoothness of the Caucasian skin. (Oates 1994, 284. Italics in the text)

Their parallel lives seem both similar and unique. He is born into a world of danger and fear; she (italics in the text) into a world of utter love and protection (consider the incubator mentioned above or the fact that Babygirl is nursed with milk of women from “the ghetto neighborhoods”, “mother’s milk for pay”). Yet the white princess’s world is clearly one that is already built on the ideas of commodification, in this case, the racialised commodification of human milk. Notice as well that *her* perfection is described in terms of animality (a pug’s nose). More importantly yet, her demise is already announced: this “love” will devour her (thus making the connection to the rat’s sharp teeth) and kill her (smother her). To take Judith Butler’s argument, both these bodies share a condition of vulnerability which precedes any act of resistance (2016, 12). Can the female human body and the non-human animal body “overcome that vulnerability through acts of resistance” (Butler 2016, 12)? As we shall see, acts of resistance are dim in “Martyrdom”, no less because non-resistance is inherent in the concept of martyrdom. Furthermore, although the act of bestiality is unwilling, the actors are nonetheless guilty of biblical deviation which, as expounded in *Leviticus*, is an act so vile and immoral that it must be punished by death of both the human and the animal.

Their parallel lives continue to be described side-by-side, sometimes with stark contrast and at other times with similarity. Over time, He has to share his space with thousands of other blood-related rats with whom he finds solace: “he sensed himself multiplied endlessly in the world” (Oates 1994, 286); but he also feels constant anxiety because of the competition for food: “all were ravenous with hunger, the *squeak! squeak! squeak!* of hunger multiplied beyond accounting” (Oates 1994, 286. Italics in the text). By contrast, Babygirl is not concerned with being fed and she grows up as an only child, still in this incubator, a metaphor for an excessively sheltered, individualised existence. She is now described as having “a rosy female beauty, small pointed breasts, curving hips, dimpled belly and buttocks and crisp cinnamon-colored pubic hair, lovely thick-eye lashed eyes with no pupil” (Oates 1994, 286), and then she starts to menstruate. Her parents disapprove, with Babygirl having lost her baby loveliness;

she betrays her name and her parents' expectations, being fully aware that womanhood cannot be repressed: "what's to be done?", asks her father (Oates 1994, 286). What the woman and the non-human animal share is their inability to mobilise in order to create a platform of political expression, a space of politics (Butler 2016, 13–14). Babygirl lives in a metaphorical incubator, a family and social space which does not allow for mobilisation. He is ontologically irrelevant because of the sheer number of his species and what it represents in human imagination and history. Resistance emerges from "a space of appearance", that is, of being seen, acknowledged and neither the rat nor Babygirl are (Butler 2016, 14). A similar argument is made regarding freedom and mobilisation; freedom can be "exercised only if there is enough support for the exercise of freedom" and mobility depends on the existence of an operative structure (Butler 2016, 14). Again, that is not the case with either He or Babygirl. Like Butler suggests, bodies are not strictly individualised matter and depend, in fact, on a network of support which makes them "not entirely distinct from one another" insofar as "the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible" (Butler 2016, 16). I believe the concept of dependency plays a key role in "Martyrdom" as it makes the non-human animal/human animal connection on the grounds of vulnerability and establishes that connection—the shared vulnerable condition associated with martyrs—as one deriving from the absence of a political space:

By theorizing the human body as a certain kind of *dependency* on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance by which the human itself proves not to be divided from the animal or from the technical world, we foreground the ways in which we are vulnerable to decimated or disappearing infrastructures, economic supports, and predictable and well-compensated labor. (Butler 2016, 21. Italics in the original)

He and Babygirl grow and so their martyrdom begins. He feels immortal, exhilarated by the adrenaline of hunting and the taste of flesh in his mouth. He, or one of the many Hes, is then suddenly caught in a horrible mousetrap. What is the equivalent for Babygirl? Under the pretence of a party, her parents transform her into a human doll/the perfect woman. Since one is not born a woman, but becomes one, in

a dehumanising, sacrificial process, she is starved, force-fed, excised and bodily modified:

First came the ritual bath, then the anointing of the flesh, the shaving and plucking of certain undesirable hairs, the curling and crimping of certain desirable hairs, she fasted for forty-eight hours, she was made to gorge herself for forty-eight hours, they scrubbed her tender flesh with a wire brush, they rubbed pungent herbs into the wounds, the little clitoris was sliced off and tossed to the clucking hens in the yard, the now shaven labia were sewed shut, the gushing blood was collected in a golden chalice, her buckteeth were forcibly straightened with pliers, her big hooked nose was broken by a quick skilled *blow from a palm of a hand*, the cartilage grew back into more desirable contours. (Oates 1994, 287. Italics added)

Beauty is pain and it seems irrelevant that Babygirl can hardly breathe. This section of a longer sentence aims to reflect the ongoing, never-ending process of becoming a woman, a social identity established by one's desirability and commitment to martyrdom (like Babygirl herself, the readers hardly have the time to breathe while reading the sentence). As a medium-sized woman she is now too fat (around 71 cm around the waist), and her once cute pug baby nose means she now looks dog-faced. Her health suffers from the metamorphosis as well. Hidden in the sentence and in the violence of this radical metaphor for becoming a woman is more violence, the type of violence that begins at home. Her nose was broken not by a surgeon, but by a blow from the palm of a hand; sexual pleasure denied by clitoral excision.

The readers may wonder why there was no sign of complaint on Babygirl's part and the fact that the text reads as if she had no reaction at all is quite unsettling. This is, however, due to the existence of a moral code of resilience which, as Sarah Bracke argues, makes the individual feel that there is an "appropriate" reaction, a form of "resilient manners" (2016, 62). There is, in fact, a gendered form of resilience which is undoubtedly at work in situations of domestic abuse, where the female subject is expected to have flexibility, to be able to bend without breaking, and, following the shocking moment, to bounce back into shape, perhaps even stronger than she was before (Bracke 2016, 65–68). Bracke conceptualises this as postfeminist resilience (2016, 65).

Babygirl's parents guard her well; she is branded with an identifying tattoo so that "she could neither be lost or mislaid, nor could the cunt run away, and lose herself in America" (Oates 1994, 288). The language

referring to Babygirl has changed into a form of verbal abuse and reduced to her genitalia. But Babygirl's genitalia is of the highest pedigree: she is a virgin, clean of venereal diseases (Oates 1994, 288). He, on the other hand, is persecuted and hated as a carrier of deadly diseases. Nevertheless, Babygirl must beware as danger lurks around every corner. Her socialising with men is described as a cattle auction and though Babygirl is highly prized, she is still referred to as cow (Oates 1994, 290–291). That is her place in the system.

In the meantime, He is changed by the brutal life his species is forced to live. His body is covered in wounds from fighting for his life and for food; out of despair and “an agony of appetite”, he even resorts to cannibalism (Oates 1994, 291). Like Babygirl's body, his body is also sick: maggots eat him away and he is gangrenous (Oates 1994, 291). However, his degradation is not divorced from his racialised body. In contrast with Babygirl's white American beauty, even in the access to food, it matters how dark He is in the rat world:

[I]t's one of Nature's quiddities, when BROWN and BLACK species occupy a single premise, BROWN (being larger and more aggressive) inhabit the lower levels while BLACK (shyer, more philosophical) are relegated to the upper levels where food foraging is more difficult. (Oates 1994, 291–292. Capitals in the original text)

One day, He, or one of the many Hes, is eaten alive by a cat who kills for pleasure. The scene is described graphically, but He lives on through his species; “*And the horror of it washed over me suddenly: I cannot die, I am multiplied to infinity*”, He realises later (Oates 1994, 296. Italics in the text). In stark contrast with Babygirl, who is put forward in terms of the uniqueness discursively constructed through human exceptionalism, He is many Hes, He is his species. Oates, however, disavows the species dichotomy by providing a gendered dimension. Babygirl meets Mr X, an apparently devoted, deeply in love suitor. The previous experience of violence which Babygirl is submitted to initially sneaks into the text quite discreetly, but once she gets married, it is full-blown. The brutality of her married life is a female legacy like her wedding dress which had been previously worn by her mother, her grandmother and great-grandmother. During the wedding itself, Mr X's wolfish traits are already manifest: “blood-red carnation in his lapel, chips of dry ice in his eyes, wide fixed grinning-white dentures, how gracefully the couple dips

and bends” (Oates 1994, 293). He is the predator and she is the prey, the rat: “This is the happiest day of my life he whispers into Babygirl’s *pink-whorled ear*” (Oates 1994, 294. Italics added).

Babygirl’s next step on the path of martyrdom is marked by yet another scene of animal abuse. This time it describes the horrors of animal experimentation including starvation, and extreme physical exertion, being singed with burning needles and penetrated in the “tender anus” (Oates 1994, 294). Of course, it ends with He’s death, again to the scientists’ great satisfaction. Only a couple of months into Babygirl’s marriage, Mr. X grows tired of her and his penis fails him (Oates 1994, 295). She has become too human for his taste and he does not appreciate the biological processes involved, their smells, and indeed the more natural behavioural characteristic of shared intimate life. Looking at Mr. X with her “cow-eyes”, Babygirl is at a loss (Oates 1994, 295). Disgusted by Babygirl, he strikes her with the backside of his hand (echoing what she had undergone in her parents’ house) and calls her a bitch. This is the moment when violence comes out of hiding, not ashamed of itself. Being called a “cow” again also reinforces the non-human animal common entanglement. In “American Bestiality: Sex, Animals and the Construction of Subjectivity”, Colleen Glenney Boggs identifies the creation of representational subjectivity as the element underlying human exceptionalism. Animality is beyond representational subjectivity, which legally and socially justifies animal abuse, but, as some humans are animalised as well by virtue of being victimised by the oppressive forces of homophobia, sexism and racism, they also become nonsubjects and beyond social recognition. Animalising humans is, therefore, a mechanism to relegate someone to the position of nonsubjectivity (2010, 99). Similarly, in *Precarious Lives*, Judith Butler emphasises the link between humanisation, dehumanisation and representation:

[T]hose who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. We have a paradox before us because [...] the face is not exclusively a human face, and yet it is a condition of humanization.

To use Butler’s terminology, Mr. X is not aware of Babygirl’s or He’s precariousness which allows him and his friends to commit brutal acts

deriving from a speciesist and sexist premise. The woman and the rat cannot represent themselves; as their faces are unrecognised, so is their suffering. The conditions of violence are, therefore, created and their lives seem ungrievable.

In the instance of being likened to a bovine, nonsubjectivity emerges from linguistic vulnerability. Language, and not strictly utterances, precedes us and, therefore, we are acted upon even before we act. Though when Butler elaborates on this issue, she uses the case of gender assignment, it is nonetheless also useful here as it connects to the broader theme of gender performativity. Gender norms and ideals exist prior to us, and in that sense our vulnerability precedes and shapes us. Hence, a woman is a cow, as at the “auction”, not only because she is commodified as the non-human body that produces milk, but also because she declines some men’s attention. A woman who rejects men is less than human. A body, as Butler puts it, is “less an entity than a relation” and that relation can be of support or lack of it (Butler 2016, 19). In this context, where is the free will? Since performativity exists in the intersection of acting and being acted upon, a truly individual, free performativity cannot happen:

We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions way before we start to sort them critically and endeavor to change or make them our own. In this way we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses we never chose. (Butler 2016, 24)

What about He? His next scene refers to the human fear of rodent reproduction. Himself a victim of his sexual urges, of his “delirium of appetite”, He and many other thousands like him are cruelly poisoned (Oates 1994, 296–297). How will He live on this time? His body and the piles of other rat corpses are mindlessly crushed and grinded to make fertiliser. As to Babygirl, Mr X. now brings “business associates” (Oates 1994, 297) home and submits his wife to molestation in a specially created fetishistic and sadistic environment. She begs for mercy, but he keeps her a prisoner with promises of a suburban life to come. However, she is no different than He in the lab, being fed reluctantly on occasion by her “keeper” (Oates 1994, 297). Her martyrdom takes the form of multiple rapes by strangers as her cruel husband watches with sadistic pleasure:

Mr. X grew systematically crueller, hardly a gentleman anymore, forcing upon his wife as she lay trussed and helpless in their *marriage* bed a man with fingernails filed razor-sharp who lacerated her *tender* flesh, a man with a glittering scaly skin, a man with a turkey's wattles, a man with an ear partly missing, a man with a stark-bald head and cadaverous smile, a man with infecting draining sores like exotic tattoos stippling his body, and poor Babygirl was whipped for disobedience, Babygirl was burnt with cigars, Babygirl was slapped, kicked, pummeled, *near-suffocated* and near-strangled and near-drowned, she screamed into her saliva-soaked gag, she thrashed, convulsed, bled in sticky skeins most distasteful for Mr. X who then punished her additionally, as a husband will do, by withholding his affection (Oates 1994, 298. Italics added)

Following Eve Segwick, Butler emphasises how speech acts can felicitously encompass undercover queer deviations of desire:

[O]ne could take a marriage vow, and this act could then establish a public recognition of marriage which then allows, or opens up, a zone of possible sexuality that takes place quite under the radar, taking advantage precisely of its unrecognizability. The marriage vow provides public cover for forms of sexual life that remain unrecognized, and happily so. In such cases, marriage organizes sexuality as we might expect, in conjugal and monogamous forms, but it also produces another zone of sexuality defined precisely for its lack of overt recognition in the public sphere. (2016, 17)

By the same token, the speech act referring to the marriage vow can open up to a zone of sexuality which is not so happily lived and, in fact, is characterised by violence and even molestation, but which remains unaccounted for because it exists in this zone of unrecognisability.

As to the further steps on the path of martyrdom, He's hunger is again emphasised. He is so hungry that he chews on his own body, but then something happens. He is caught and sold to Mr. X who has specific plans for him. The rat will now stand in for his penis and, in fact, Mr. X even hides He in his pants and only unzips them to release the rodent once he gets to Babygirl's bed. The stage is then set for a perverse performance of love-making and a reverse birth scene. Babygirl is gagged and He netted in the bed with her. The "pair" is terrified, but Mr. X and his associates are ready to enjoy the show (Oates 1994, 300). He is in a panic as Mr. X forces him into Babygirl's vagina, as she is lying on the bed spread-eagled. Naturally, he claws her badly and hurts her with his teeth. The

image is horrifying and mirrors Babygirl's previous abuse: "snout-first, and then head-first, then his shoulders, his sleek muscular length, why *there* – in *there* – so he choked, nearly suffocated, used his teeth to tear a way free for himself" (Oates 1994, 300. Italics in the text). Mr. X. trembles with excitement and his friends are the happy spectators to the gory martyrdom:

[They] watched in awe pushed him [He] farther, and then *farther* – into the blood-hot pulsing toughly elastic tunnel between poor Babygirl's fatty thighs – and still *farther* until only the sleek-furry end of his rump and his trailing hind legs and, of course, the eight-inch pink tail were visible. His panicked gnawing of the fleshy walls that so tightly confined him released small geysers of blood that nearly drowned him, and the involuntary spasms of clenching of poor Babygirl's pelvic muscles nearly crushed him, thus how the struggle would have ended, if both he and Babygirl had not lost consciousness at the same instant, is problematic. (Oates 1994, 301. Italics in the text)

It is as if they were making love and had both reached their climax at the same time, but instead, it is an *agon*, a contest, coming to an end. Both lose. Perversely, Jeanne d'Arc is mentioned who, burning at the flames, called Jesus's name in ecstasy. Babygirl neither experiences ecstasy nor does she die, but she accepts her martyrdom for a higher cause, her marriage. The culmination of Oates's short story, the point where both the rat's and the woman's stories/bodies finally converge, is, therefore, materialised through bestiality subverting a birth scene. This subversion represents the reenactment of a pre-subjectivity moment and of a Semiotic existence when the individual still had not been formed. It is a moment of abjection.

Unlike the open, irregular, mutable grotesque body of the Bakhtinian universe, connecting to the world through fluids and orifices, for Julia Kristeva (1982) those transactions generate abjection. The individual's primordial contact with the world is experienced *in/through* their mother's body, an experience of Semiotic plenitude where frontiers have not been erected. Kristeva argues that abjection serves the purpose of providing the violent transition to the Symbolic Order. Before the beginning, there is separation from the mother's body (Kristeva 1982, 12). The process of abjection is primarily a process of rejection, discard or rejection of that which threatens the constitution of the individual. Abjection marks the frontiers between the individual, the world and those in it. The

response to abjection is repulse in the face of that which is not part of the individual: food, excrement, urine, vomit, sperm, menstrual blood and ultimately the cadaver. Abjection reminds the need to be always vigilant before elements that constitute a menace to identity or that disturb the Order and access to the mother's body becomes prohibited. Abjecting is necessarily ambiguous as determining what is internal or external is never definitive and the extension to which the Other is part of the individual will remain unclear. Any slippage is potentially dehumanising. Having an animal involved in the reenactment of human birth activates the fears of the indistinguishability between the human and the non-human.

In this respect, Glenney Boggs has also pointed out that bestiality is a construction which is gendered and sexual (2010, 100), in itself a "mode of embodied animality, that is, of human interaction with the animal body and an animalization of human bodies" (Glenney Boggs 2010, 101). This ontological and material indeterminacy situates the bodies of the female human and the male rodent clearly in the realm of abjection. Though she argues that in the bestial encounter human exceptionalism allows for conceptualising animality as "a position of nonsubjectivity and of socially sanctioned abjection", it is assumed that the entities are in an unequal position in a hierarchy of biopower (Glenney Boggs 2010, 99). In the fictional text at hand, however, the gendered construction of human nonsubjectivity does not confirm that. Both are non-recognisable and marginal to the mechanisms of white patriarchal violence working through/in them. They are accumulatively subalternised as they are made to cross the boundaries of species, race and sex.

If indeed Judith Butler's matrix of the heterosexual is built upon androcentric assumptions, Glenney Boggs argues that in the trials of bestiality, the anthropocentric angle must also be considered.² Her criticism of Butler's re-ontologisation of species in the process of de-ontologising gender is not without ground: "The exclusion of animals from the matrix of gender relegates them to a realm of nonperformative embodiment that is hypersexualized precisely because it is denied gendered status and figured as nonrepresentational physicality" (Glenney Boggs 2010, 104–105). Considering the rat, it is not only male but also a synecdochal human phallus, totally deprived of his ontological animality, made a grotesque materialisation of phallogocentrism ("He"). And yet, it is that same phallic rat who also displays the feminine features of the *vagina dentata*, the teeth (Creed 1993). Mr X creates a spectacle of the repressed fear of castration by animal surrogation whilst

his own penis is safely awaiting revival by perverse voyeurism. Babygirl, once untouched and falsely protected by the misogynistic cultural baggage of female virginity, has become untouchable by her “man”, suited even for animal sexual consumption. Babygirl and He are, therefore, barred from the animal and gender constructions which define them—though blurring those very definitions—and thus assume a position which Glenney Boggs, following Agamben, has termed “bare sex”, a “position of hyper-embodiment that is denied social meaning” (2010, 105).

The interspecies sexual act, where both the human and the non-human animal are abused by being forced into unwilling coitus, further complicates possible regenerative readings aligned with the carnivalesque-grotesque and overthrows the rebirth symbolism of the vagina as the mouth of the earth (Bakhtin 1984). The rat is no mole. A consideration of the theory of disgust can also shed some light on this discussion. There are many points of conflation with the Bakhtinian theory as it emphasises the corporeality and the processes of bodily encounters (eating, vomiting, having intercourse, defecating and even dying). I will focus on the matter of purity versus impurity which are regarded differently by Bakhtin and William Ian Miller. For the former, “impurity” is a material condition associated with debasement and coming down to earth; for the latter, it is not positive:

[Disgust] defends against the impure and it punishes for our failures to be pure. But not all purity rules or rituals are backed by disgust. Some are maintained by shame, guilt, *a sense of duty* or by mere habit. So that where there is disgust there will be pollution, but where there is purity there is the prospect of its defilement need not always engender disgust. Yet despite the fact that other passions can support purity rules, no single one seems as qualified as for the job as disgust is (Miller 1997, 107. My italics).

Bestiality stands, therefore, for a possible strategy for the construction of the (androcentric) human and such can be seen operating in the short story though, by virtue of Babygirl’s gender, a second-class human. As a woman, it is she who is accountable for the continuance of the institution which preserves the Law of the Father. A woman must make her marriage work, after all. The utter abject sexual act becomes a travesty of the sacred institution, marriage, not protected from impurity as the man is aroused

(not disgusted) by bestiality and the woman is bound by the sense of duty. It is this sacrifice that clearly distinguishes the archetype of the martyr and stands apart from that of the victim which makes embodied martyrdom a necessary component in crediting the cause of anthropocentric, racialised American patriarchy.

Bestiality does not threaten the return of the Semiotic and, instead, reinforces the Symbolic through violence. Marriage survives stronger than before; broken up and severely bruised following the rape by the rat, Babygirl can only focus on the task ahead: cleaning up the mess. She finds solace in the evangelical sermons she watches on television, a pivotal part of the construction of conservative white America. Banality settles in. It is Babygirl's birthday and her abusive husband takes her out for dinner. She is bleeding black blood, but instead she is terribly worried that he and the children might have forgotten the occasion. She is (cruelly) optimistic because she is loved enough to be remembered. It is the first time we hear that she is a mother. Like He, she also breeds and the legacy of martyrdom shall be passed on if there are any daughters. In his way, He survives too. After all, there is no restaurant without a rat. Our resilient subject "bounce[s] back" (Bracke 2016).

The intersection of the discourses of martyrdom and resilience strengthen the radical potential of the vulnerable body. In the two cases at hand, sadistic violence, known to be systemic against non-humans and women, is exposed though kept within the private sphere. As mediums of cultural tenets with emotional value, they are empowered by their own martyrdom as they become sites simultaneously of pain and resilience—the rat and the woman live on—with broader social meaning. Quite significantly, the martyr's suffering is made public but *not* glorified and so their bodies become the space of speciesist and misogynistic contestation. This process of consciousness-raising is never free of pain though, and an affirmative ethical framework beyond the emotions of fear and anxiety requires work (Braidotti 2006). The transforming process involves enhancing how oppression operates so that then disidentification can take place. Pain, posits Rosi Braidotti, must be part of a process of political and ethical awakening:

The qualitative leap through pain, across the mournful landscapes of nostalgic yearning, is the gesture of active creation of affirmative ways of belonging. It is a fundamental reconfiguration of our way of being in the world, which acknowledges the pain of loss but moves further. This is the

defining moment for becoming-ethical: the move across and beyond pain, loss, and negative emotions. (2006, 8)

A radical theory of martyrdom which is informed by critical ethics such as vulnerability, resilience and affirmation can help to generate a social imaginary committed to mobilising desired transformative behaviours, encouraging disidentification and persuading audiences to take action against indifference.

4.3 CONCLUSIONS

Resistance, understood as a social and political form of agency emanating from an understanding of vulnerability as a social and political form, can be productive. As Judith Butler argues, once vulnerability is approached as a concept which is politically charged and which leaks into agency, then binarisms can be undone. These include anthropocentric and patriarchal codes which assign action to the male human. Alternatively, a conceptual framework which constitutes the subject relationally creates the space for networks of social resistance and the creation of infrastructures of support.

However, in this short story one must ask if the conditions to mobilise vulnerability are present:

[T]he dependency of human and other creatures on infrastructural support exposes a specific vulnerability that we have when we are unsupported, when those infrastructural conditions characterizing our social, political, and economic lives start to decompose, or when we find ourselves radically unsupported under conditions of precarity or under explicit conditions of threat. (Butler 2016, 19)

When the space of public politics is absent, sometimes, “continuing to exist, to move, and to breathe are forms of resistance” (Butler 2016, 26). In a similar manner, Sarah Bracke claims that when individuals willingly become the subjects of a moral discourse that endows them with agency (2016, 62–63). It is problematic that neither He nor Babygirl have the freedom to choose. One remains, nevertheless, attached to resilience though that hopeful attachment might be cruel (Bracke 2016, 65). The form that martyrdom takes on in Joyce Carol Oates’s short story shapes the martyrs’ lives as potentially ungrievable and questions the affirmative scope of resilience. Nonetheless, a radical, inclusive, non-anthropocentric

and gendered model of martyrdom which accepts the private sphere as political and ideologically relevant, as the very anti-speciesist and feminist battlefield, offers a considerably higher chance of resilience.

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NOTES

1. In 2019, Joyce Carol Oates published *My Life as a Rat* on the question of gender and race in the United States. However, it is not equally suited to a discussion on animals, and therefore, the novel will not be considered in this article.
2. Though I would agree that Butler’s discussions do not substantially address the animal question, she has demonstrated interest in including the issue in her reflections. Notably, she has maintained conversations with Sunaura Taylor on the matter as well as on the equally relevant field of disability. See *Examined Life: Philosophy in the Street* (2008).

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‘Nobody Kills a Priest’: Irish Noir and Pathogenic Vulnerability in Benjamin Black’s *Holy Orders*

Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The concepts of vulnerability and precariousness have been a major object of interest since Judith Butler approached them in her ground-breaking studies *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). By and large, the philosopher has defended that our existential exposure to the action of others posits human life as inherently precarious, while also implying that ethical responses are binding to effectively eradicate, or at least curtail, such ingrained vulnerability, which is, nonetheless, more acute for some individuals and groups than others. In recent years, developing further this ontological formulation and capitalising on the relationality of our

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embodied existence, Butler emphasises the dependency of bodies on institutional structures and the material conditions of social orders. For her, since a body “is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible” (2016, 16), then vulnerability becomes exacerbated “when we are unsupported, when those infrastructural conditions characterizing our social, political, and economic lives start to decompose, or when we find ourselves radically unsupported under conditions of precarity or under explicit conditions of threat” (2016, 19). Drawing on such circumstantial aspects, in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* Catriona Mckenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds highlight the role of social policies in redressing the disadvantages of individuals and/or communities, and the moral obligations of the states and their apparatuses to guarantee extensive and reliable protection. Within their particular taxonomy of vulnerability, which attends to its various sources and the different states where vulnerable beings may be allocated, they propose, among others, a categorisation that considers the “pathogenic” interpretation of the term. According to Mckenzie, Rogers and Dodds, this type of vulnerability appears in cases of “morally dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships and sociopolitical oppression or injustice” or “when a response intended to ameliorate vulnerability has the paradoxical effect of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones” (2014, 9). In this sense, the three critics follow Butler’s postulates about the failures of the infrastructural norm just mentioned, as well as the concept of “institutional precariousness” delineated by Brian S. Turner in *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, by which the presupposed protection that states must grant to their citizens is regularly invalidated by the precarity of their own institutional power, thus leading, paradoxically, to subsequent abuses and vulnerabilities (2006, 32).

All these critical stances about the politics and ethics of vulnerability come in useful for the purposes of this chapter, which addresses Ireland’s deficient practices of systemic power through the analysis of *Holy Orders* (2013), published by John Banville under the pen name Benjamin Black. This crime novel constitutes the sixth title in the so-called Quirke series, set in 1950s Dublin and featuring a pathologist from the Holy Family Hospital simply known as Quirke. Like the rest, the text under analysis tackles crimes that result from the distortion of the official norms of protection and care that the Catholic Church-Irish State dyad and their social allies carried out in their own benefit and throughout the greater part of the twentieth century. In this thriller, the protagonist and

his only friend, Detective Inspector Hackett, investigate the murder of Jimmy Minor, a young journalist who had been surveying the dealings of Packie Joyce, a tinker¹ clan leader. Their investigation discloses the complicity of some of the agents of official order at the time, like the high Catholic authorities, the press and the police, and they pinpoint, on the one hand, the multi-layered precarity of Ireland's travellers, that appear, I argue, as archives of the failing of infrastructural norms and paradigms of pathogenic vulnerability, as discussed by Butler, McKenzie, Rogers and Dodds. On the other hand, the case captures the effects of a corrupted network of control and influence, and its concomitant rule of silence, whose dysfunctionality generates, as formulaic in some crime fiction narratives, a string of parallel justice that problematises the ethics of the system and shakes its underlying principles.

Black's Quirke novels have been praised for "laying bare the underbelly of the conservative Ireland of half a century previously" (Campbell Ross 2011, 33) and interpreted as "a refashioning of the entire panoply of recently uncovered postindependence state crime" (Dell'Amico 2014, 114). In fact, as a whole the series delves into long silenced secrets of the darkest era of Ireland's recent past, like the illegal trafficking of babies from Mother and Baby Homes to rich American adoptive families, backstreet abortion, incest and paedophilia, among others.² As Black has repeatedly admitted, he has always been fascinated by this decade, in which "the Church had a complete stranglehold on the country" (Birbaum 2011), also arguing that "the 1950s is why we are here" (Burke 2011, 224). The author's crime accounts offer, then, a critique of the inadequacy of the policies articulated by the agents of power in the country and, by extension, the moral tenets upon which they were founded. Following Audrey McNamara, I believe that Quirke's growing nosiness and concern with the cases—another convention in detective thrillers—lead him to eventually ascertain, "contrary to the protection for women and children enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, the systematic abuse and suppression of the vulnerable in society and the subsequent support and concealment of these injustices" (2016, 135).

Moreover, my reading of Black's novel is aligned with Butler's most recent approach to the notion of resistance, whereby she claims that "there is plural and performative bodily resistance at work that shows how bodies are being acted on by social and economic policies that are decimating livelihoods" (2016, 15). However, Butler continues, "these bodies, in showing this precarity, are also resisting these very powers;

they enact a form of resistance that presupposes their vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity” (2016, 15). In this light, I believe that Black masterfully uses the crime fiction genre as a narrative space to portray and denounce the moral corruption of the Catholic Church and its many forms of abuse, which remained concealed and unquestioned up to the last decades of the twentieth century.³ It is my contention that the “holy orders” in the title suggest not only the mandates of the omnipotent religious figures that inhabit the story, but also a confessional status quo in which, well into the twentieth century and beyond, the Catholic doctrine and many of the civil schemes in the country have been executed in sectarian terms, so that the continuous circle of sacred and untouchable power has thwarted counteractions and, subsequently, proper accountability for the atrocities committed in that confessional ethos. Thus, I will attempt to demonstrate how the systemic precarisation of individuals runs through *Holy Orders*, as the story maps out the many failings of a social milieu where the bodies of subaltern individuals remain under control, and consequently, any form of resistance does not only prolong vulnerability, but it also leads to further victimisation. To this aim, I will first explore how the failure of Ireland’s network of infrastructural support has prevailed throughout time, decimating the lives of some of its most vulnerable individuals. Then, I will trace the different forms of vigilantism, a convention in crime fiction, that appear in the novel as products of such deficiency, and the troubling questions that they also typically pose for the contemporary reader.

5.2 PATHOGENIC VULNERABILITY

In a synecdochical interpretation of the outreach of the Quirke series, McNamara observes that through the pathologist “Black has taken the corpse of 1950s Ireland and removed the secrecy that surrounded it” (2016, 146). Indeed, in the early pages of *Holy Orders*, as in most of the titles in the series, readers encounter a classic scene in crime fiction: a post-mortem. At the dissecting table of the hospital morgue, Quirke must examine the cadaver of *The Clarion* reporter Jimmy Minor, who had been dumped into a central Dublin canal after being beaten to death. Shortly afterwards, the pathologist becomes progressively obsessed with finding details of this mysterious murder, although this time he has an added interest, as Jimmy was a very good friend of Quirke’s daughter, Phoebe. After an interview with the newspaper’s editors and a visit to

Jimmy's flat in order to track clues on the case, Quirke and Inspector Hackett learn that the reporter had been enquiring about the contact circles of Father Mick Honan, a social-activist priest in charge of an educational programme whereby he was encouraging the travellers "to settle down and quit stravaiging the country" (2013, 77). This obscure character emerges not only as the central figure in the conundrum, but also as a representative of the corruption of the Church authorities, or "the sky pilots" (2013, 78), as Hackett calls them. Thus, they end up discovering that before dropping out of sight, the priest had been hiding terrible secrets of his repeated sexual molestation of tinker children.

The lack of socio-normative protection experienced at many levels by the Irish-travelling community certainly occupies a central position in the novel, and it is introduced when Quirke and Hackett visit the tinkers' camp-site in Tallaght, a south Dublin district near the countryside, in search for its chief trader. It is the picturesqueness but also the desolation of the place what strikes the two men, although the inspector, more the countryman type than the pathologist, admits to being actually jealous of the travellers for having "the life [...] out in the good air, under God's clear sky" (2013, 217). In response to this comment, and with an acerbic tone, Quirke rebukes that "The average tinker's life expectancy is twenty-nine years [...] and the death rate among their new-born is one in three" (2013, 217). The clash between these two viewpoints illustrates Jose Lanter's observations in *The "Tinkers" in Irish Literature*, when claiming that stereotypes as well as literary or popular constructs have been for long the sources of information for most settled Irish people. For her, it is remarkable how they are more familiar with those images rather than "with the real circumstances of the lives of their fellow citizens in the Traveller community" (2008, 6). Indeed, what Lanter calls "the trope of tinkerness" seems to be at stake in the conversation between Hackett and Quirke, where the former's view is more socially biased, while the latter's accent on the precarity of the tinkers is informed by a data-based and more scientific outlook. Thus, through Quirke Black voices some of the major problems that the inefficient social policies as well as the racist and exclusionary practices prevalent in Ireland since that period continue to weigh upon the travelling community. This consistent precarisation is explored in *Irish Travellers: Racism and The Politics of Culture*, where Jane Helleiner calls attention to how in contemporary Ireland "[t]he effects of such practices are evident in the disproportionate levels of poverty, low life expectancy, and high neonatal and child mortality within

the Traveller population” (2000, 5). Nonetheless, accepting the fact that our object of study is a literary construct too, we must pose the added insight that in order to counteract the tropes mentioned by Lanter, and offering instead a critical vision of the tinkers’ vulnerability, Black makes a fine use of the realist discourse that characterises crime fiction. As such, the novel minutely depicts the camp-site atmosphere and its inhabitants’ lifestyle,⁴ particularly evident during the first direct appearance of Packie, a well-known name in the scrap metal business in town. Quite evocatively, the narrator recounts that the tinker’s field of operations seemed like “a battlefield” (2013, 219), adverting that with the big fire in the middle of the place, the smoke of burning tyres, the gang of children running wild and Packie’s tough guy looks, “[t]he scene was archaic and thrilling, and dismaying, too, in its violence and volatility” (2013, 220).

Yet, the core element in Black’s articulation of vulnerability can be found in Packie’s intellectually impaired daughter, Lily, a teenager born to one of his former lovers that is minded by his current partner, Molly. The fact that the girl got pregnant after Father Honan’s repeated sexual assaults renders her as one of the epitomes of injurability, in the most etymological sense of the vulnerability terminology. Indeed, the multiple dimension of her plight calls to mind Butler’s observation that “women and minorities [...] are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization”, resulting from how “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies” (2004, 20). When first presented to the reader, Lily’s physical frailty and intellectual disability, aggravated by the hard-living conditions in the caravan site, pave the way for the pathogenic vulnerability that later in the story she is confirmed to encapsulate. Thus, when Quirke meets the girl, and as a kind of premonition, he feels that her eyes had seen “things a child should not see” (2013, 224). Afterwards, having made further enquiries in the Rectory of the Trinitarian Brothers, and on account of Father Honan’s sudden transfer to the African missions, the priest’s depredation begins to dawn upon the pathologist, so he resolves to visit Tallaght again. There, Packie’s partner—Molly—tells Quirke the particulars of the events prior to Jimmy’s murder, in what constitutes, to my mind, an excessively informational revelation at the story’s denouement. Thus, the bluntness of her delivery about the crimes behind the priest’s educational programme destabilises the interrogation and inspection rituals as well as the suspenseful pace of the detecting process narrated in the novel so far. Without reservations, Molly promptly informs

Quirke that through several interviews, the reporter had found out the sexual violence inflicted upon Lily and other children in the tinkers' site. It is then suggested that this discovery would eventually turn Jimmy into a scapegoat, as the collateral victim of the institutional precarisation of the travellers, and also another exponent of pathogenic vulnerability, as will be analysed below.

In a quasi-monologue with Joycean echoes and a bitter tone, Molly explains that Father Honan had persuaded Packie to approach Lily in order to teach her "book-learning and the like" (2013, 281). However, the woman had quickly realised his true intentions: "The like that you wouldn't find in any decent reading-book. Had them all at it, at the learning, so-called, all the lads and the girleens in the camp. Himself (Packie) was delighted. *Oh, they'll all be great scholars, he'd say, they'll get grand jobs and keep me when I'm old. The mugathawn*"⁵ (2013, 283, original emphasis). Through the complexity of such criminal behaviour, with a predator priest, a concurrent but equally vulnerable woman guardian⁶ and a negligent father, the author seems to recognise and certainly draws attention to the social policies that the newly formed Irish State had been trying to set up for the tinkers at that time. With an emphasis on what Helleiner calls a "child saving" discourse, focalised on an allegedly higher exposure to criminality linked to lack of schooling and low levels of literacy, official care-related programmes directed to the travelling community in the 1940s and 1950s were based on an attribution of their vulnerability to a presumed incompetence of the parents due to the distinctive living habits of the travellers. As she puts it, "while Traveller children were constructed as dangerous to the wider community, they were also described more sympathetically as the endangered 'victims' of an adult Traveller lifestyle of mobility and camping" (2000, 69). However, Helleiner also demonstrates that the state's public expression of official concern for the traveller children proved insufficient, as the parliamentary acts and social measures in this regard were vague and inconclusive in those years.

A recurrent infantilising discourse, also modelled on vulnerability terms, can be found in the articulation of the character that had triggered the case of *Holy Orders*, Jimmy Minor, although through him Black simultaneously explores the extent to which Ireland's hegemonic structures may be effectively defied or not. Interestingly, the novel relies on the indirect narrative of Jimmy's actions and personality via other characters, such as Harry Clancy, the editor of *The Clarion*, whose reflections

reveal significant aspects of the professional practices and the personal attitudes of his employee: “There had always been something of the victim about Jimmy Minor”, who “had taken everything too seriously” (2013, 45–46). As the events unfold, the naivety and delusion of the reporter are revisited through his twin sister, Sally, who travels from London to Dublin to investigate the death of her brother, and she admits to Quirke and Phoebe that he always gave the impression of being “a little boy who loved the movies” (2013, 195). Such comment not only echoes Clancy’s view, but it also confirms the idealistic and unrelenting personality of the young dead man, whose affects are regularly brought into the open in the novel and seem to have transcended death. Thus, the mystery around his research, but most importantly, his determination to outstrip the authority of the Church are also highlighted when Clancy introduces another outlook to the notions of vulnerability and protection, by admitting there was some kind of “inevitability” in the death of Jimmy, who “had seen himself as a crusader, a Clark Kent who one day soon would turn into Superman” (2013, 45–46). The strong commitment of the reporter, which had compromised his physical integrity but had also led him to eventually unmask Father Honan, can be read through the lens of Butler’s appreciation that resistance and vulnerability should not be considered as mutually exclusive. If we accept the philosopher’s view that “vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (2016, 22), then it can be easily argued that by daring to confront the representatives of official power, Jimmy had enacted his resistance and challenged the pathogenic vulnerability that prevailed in Ireland at that time, with the ultimate effect of his own death.

In addition to this, and standing out as a one of the elements that distinguish *Holy Orders* from the other titles in the series, the author elaborates on the ongoing effects of vulnerability by projecting Lily’s victimisation directly unto Quirke, and vice versa. Such reverberation constitutes an effective technique for the characterisation of the pathologist, which reaches a climactic moment in this text. His troubled life as an orphan boy consigned to Carricklea Industrial School, but later adopted by an influential Dublin judge continually involved in murky affairs, can be grasped by the consistent narrative focus on the existential consequences of such past experiences, which lead to the pathologist’s alienation, misanthropy and intermittent alcoholism, among other weaknesses. The complexity of his personality, along with the fact that, conventionally, he remains

the moral axis in this crime fiction story, allow the author to examine the continuum of abuse and victimisation that characterised the Irish confessional order, which is portrayed as chronic not only during Quirke's childhood years, but also during the time frame of the action of this novel. Like Lily, but several decades before, Quirke "had been abused, body and soul, by priests and brothers" (2013, 90) in Carricklea and the other institutions he had been consigned to. And like all the traveller children molested by Father Honan, the pathologist had been unable to share or publicly express the details of such violent maltreatment, attesting to the prevalence of child abuse and the grip of the country's rule of silence. Thus, in an incisive elaboration of that continuum of verbal repression, Quirke's question to Molly about the abused children in the camp—"Why hadn't they told what was happening?" (2013, 283)—quickly acquires a rhetorical dimension when the narrator annotates: "To whom would he have spoken, when he was a child at Carricklea? Who would have believed him?" (2013, 283). Moreover, this intergenerational physical and psychological violence stretches even further to the momentous time of the publication of the novel so that, using John Murphy's words, "it's very difficult to shake the sensation that this novel is not happening over a half-century later, amidst continued revelations of clerical abuse and conspiracy" (2013). Accordingly, the life-long trauma that Quirke experiences, with constant flashbacks to his life in the Industrial School, that in this novel grow into long, vivid hallucinations, functions as another exponent of the failing of the infrastructural, or strictly speaking institutional, norms of the Irish State. These lasting effects constitute the predication of Quirke's pathogenic vulnerability, and they are forcefully portrayed through his own daughter, who pictures him as a manifest victim of his past. As Phoebe admits, it seems "as if there's a little boy hiding inside him and looking out through adult eyes at the world, trying to understand it, and failing" (2013: 205).

Therefore, stemming from these different layers of vulnerability endured by all the victimised subjects in the novel, we find that their fragile status is commonly set against the figure of Father Honan, who embodies the faults of the most precarising community in the novel: the Irish Catholic Church. Reviewers of *Holy Orders* have distinguished its portrayal of "a monolithic Church unassailable in its claim to Godliness" (Gaines 2013), punctuating how "the obnoxious collusions between church and State, the golden circles of power and influence at their nefarious backstairs work, the sycophants, hypocrites, bishops and bounders

are all pitilessly exposed to the reader's gaze" (Dukes 2013). Indeed, the double morality of the priest is signalled in his categorical explanation about the type of Catholicism he professes: "My Church is the *Mater Misericordiae*, the mother of sorrows and forgiveness [...] My work is carried on in the streets, in the tenements, in the camp sites of the travelling people" (2013, 155). If this excerpt calls to mind the meanings of pathogenic vulnerability, presenting as it does an official agent of guardianship, guidance and charity belying the precepts and creed he represents, and hence aggravating the vulnerability of the victims through his perpetration of sexual crimes, it must also be noted how the author spotlights the inherent precarity of this type of institutional power, following the terms discussed by Turner. Likewise, this representation of the failure of the Church in its moral obligation to protect the vulnerable reinforces Leticia Sabsay's postulates about the intersection of vulnerability, permeability and the affects. In her own words, permeability operates "as a transindividual way of being in the world [...] permeability becomes a marker through which to highlight the idea that the subject is always decentred by the primacy of the other in its own being" (2016, 286). Following this argument, a compelling paradox results when the religious principles of pastoral care on the island were endemically reinterpreted in self-indulgent terms, thereby demonstrating the extent to which permeability locates the individual in a constantly decentred condition, recurrently at the mercy of the clergy's actions and decisions.

5.3 COUNTERACTING VULNERABILITY: THE VIGILANTE

The fact that the confrontation to the representatives of hegemonic power in the novel is rather unfeasible can be further grasped as the plot ushers in another crucial element for the noir genre, and that also builds up on the vulnerability/resistance dichotomy. Thus, Black incorporates the theme of vigilantism in the latter part of the narrative arc, particularly through Packie and Sally, who despite coming from very different backgrounds, share an agentive extra-legal reaction against the vulnerability of their loved ones, and subsequently, against their own victimisation. The vigilante, as described by Les Johnson, is an agent that following his/her perceived transgressions of institutional regulations and devising a calculated plan, intends to control crime and guarantee security by enacting or threatening to enact violence. However, the most important aspect of Johnson's definition lies in the fact that vigilantism is carried

out “without the state’s authority and support” (1996, 226), rather than focussing on the distinction between the illegality or extra-legality of vigilante actions. This private/public dichotomy implied by vigilantism can be brought to bear on Black’s articulation of the systematic failure of state action, whose corruption, stagnation and inefficiency are catalysts for individual, albeit obnoxious, responses to it. In the case of Packie, during Molly’s conversation with Quirke, it is made clear to readers that, out of anger and paternal offence, the dealer had actually sent his older sons to kill Jimmy in order to avenge his daughter. Thus, Molly explains that when hearing about Lily’s pregnancy, he “wouldn’t have it that it was the priest” (2013, 283), while her ensuing interpretation that “Somebody had to pay the price [...] Sure, you couldn’t touch the priest, you’d have no luck after that” (2013, 283) illustrates both Packie’s setting up for the family vendetta and the latent uneasiness to the immense power of the Church that induced his criminal behaviour. As for Sally, her self-attribution of authority and punishment is even more noteworthy since, contrary to Packie, who remains sidelined from then on, she grows in relevance in the story and dominates its climax, which suggests that gender plays a significant role in the configuration of the two vigilantes.

Quite interestingly, Sally is initially presented as a desperate young woman looking for clues that might lead her to her brother’s murderer, and there are indications of her inceptive impotence and loss. Hence, when first meeting Phoebe, she looked “young and vulnerable” (2013, 131), while as the two women forge a closer friendship, the narrator insists on her mourning and anguish through Phoebe’s thoughts like “What must it be like for her, coming to consciousness each morning and remembering yet again her brother’s death and the cruel circumstances in which he had died?” (2013, 182). As it happened to Packie, grief for the damage done to a close relative is presented as an important affect and a determining factor for vigilantism, which echoes as well the relational dimension of vulnerability mentioned above. However, there is an interesting asymmetry between the two vigilantes, as Sally reconducts such affect and vulnerability in a fully agentic way,⁷ whereby her reaction, also much more premeditated than Packie’s, does not require the intervention of other people rather than herself. In this sense, with the course of events, there is an important twist in her characterisation that involves not only an intimate encounter with Phoebe that empowers both women, but most noticeably, a gradually stronger conviction to fight for her dead brother, whatever costs this may bring for her. Thus, her determination

illustrates Butler's idea that "political resistance relies fundamentally on the mobilization of vulnerability, which means that vulnerability can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (2016, 24). As Sally informs Phoebe, "I've no intention of ending up dead in the canal, like poor James did" (2013, 187), while shortly afterwards we hear that "The light in her eyes had turned cold [...] 'I'll find out,' she said. 'I won't rest until I do'" (2013, 195, original emphasis).

From this point on, Black's novel offers a thought-provoking commentary on the possibilities of resistance, along with the intersectional forms of conspiracy and unobjective justice that despite being present in other titles in the series too, are not presented with the acute critique to the misdeeds of the Church that characterises *Holy Orders*. As Murphy states, in the novel, there is a looming "connivance of a compliant, cowed government with the lordly Church in the oppressive era of postwar Irish history" (2013). Such ethos and its lingering effects are actually acknowledged by Sally when she admits to Phoebe: "I know what this place is like, the secretiveness, the hidden things" (2013, 203). However, it is when her own affects are stirred and she confirms the inefficiency and limited scope of action of the official forces of the law that she decides to resist vulnerability and find her own way to justice. Her indignation is evidenced in questions like "But they wouldn't –Dr Quirke, the guards– [...] they wouldn't let his death go unsolved, would they?" (2013, 204). This cross-examination illustrates Christiana Gregoriou's words in *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*: "The existence of this genre, perhaps more than any other, depends on the knowledge that everything will be 'made right in the end', and this necessity for narrative closure is identified with the existence of the Law. Such narratives adopt an ideological division between the legal and the illegal that at close inspection appears to be paradoxical" (2007, 54). Yet, as Black himself has claimed, "in these books nothing is ever resolved" and "the baddies are not put away" (Inskeep 2011). Such noir practice of non-conclusive cases is also articulated in the novel through Phoebe, the eternal sceptic about the mechanisms used in the city to deal with criminality, who also regularly reproaches her father for his unwillingness to fight harder against the establishment: "Nothing ever happens [...] People commit murder and get away with it. [...] You let them get away with it" (2013, 291). To this complaint, Quirke responds with the sententious phrase that inspires the title of this chapter: "Nobody kills a priest. [...] Not even the likes of Packie Joyce will kill a priest" (2013, 291). The disparate position of

father and daughter, by which Phoebe appears much more indignant and combative than an inured, pragmatic Quirke, enables the author to introduce what I believe is one of the most figurative and scathing utterances in the whole series, and which arguably summarises the organisation of the plot of this particular novel.

Drawing on this complex representation of Ireland's executive dysfunctionality, Sally's vigilantism seems then expected, but her revengeful murder of Father Honan simply confirms the circularity of such deficit, as she justifies the killing on the inaction of those at the service of the law and on the same conspiracy politics she had previously denounced. Thus, in a symbolical scene where, disguised as a pregnant woman, Sally approaches the priest at the confessional, she shoots him dead on the spot, with the certainty that the murder would be infallibly hidden from the media and public knowledge by order of the Church high ranks:

This was, she knew, the only way. Phoebe's father would not do anything; neither would the police. It was up to her to make sure justice was done, and now she was going to do it [...] They would cover it up, she supposed, as they covered up everything, every scandal. No she did not care. Yet it came to her that of all the things she had done in her life, most of them could have been undone. But not this. [...] She had got justice for her brother. She had done what was needed. (2013, 297–299)

This passage is worth quoting at length as it conveys many of the elements of pathogenic vulnerability discussed above. Sally's careless ruminations underscore the orbit of dominance of the Church in its orchestration of schemes that, with the complicity of the press, would guarantee its infallibility, while having largely failed in its integrity and its duty of care for the vulnerable. Besides, through this criminal machination, Black illustrates what Quirke calls "the belt of the crozier" (2013, 304), opening up debates around the dialectics of blame and responsibility that lay at the heart of Ireland's confessional state. In *Detecting the Social*, Mary Evans, Sarah Moor and Hazel Johnstone establish a distinction between these two terms, whereby the former alludes to "something that a person or group allocates to another" and the latter "refers to someone being answerable for a deed. Responsibility is something that is allocated on the basis of a forensic examination of someone's role in an event or act, and that's because it infers causation. To accept responsibility means acknowledging that something you did caused something

to happen (or, that something you *didn't* do was instrumental in an event)” (2019, 64–65, original emphasis). With this distinction in mind, we can hence consider that the flow of blame can be immediately allocated to Sally, whereas the complot politics of the Church and its inherent corruption ultimately appear as responsible for the crime. Indeed, as Evans, Moore and Johnstone further observe, in contemporary crime fiction, quite often “those who do bad things are rarely presented to us as *agents*, but rather *products* of abusive relationships and cultures of corruption” and the onus resides in “identifying the underlying structures that gave rise to these specific bad episodes” (2019, 80–81, original emphasis). In this case, Father Honan’s murder, and Jimmy’s, figure as indirect offshoots to the institutional precariousness of the Church and as paradigms of the pathogenic vulnerability that can occur if, as the novel suggests, the omnipotent and omnipresent hegemony of the Church hierarchy remains impenetrable.

5.4 CONCLUSIONS

All in all, a thorough analysis of *Holy Orders* reveals the systematic precarisation of individuals in contemporary Ireland and its extensive effects. With this literary representation of the different forms of vulnerability that the dysfunctionally moral practices of the Catholic Church and its allies effected upon subjects from different social, age and gender groups, we can recognise how the failure of the infrastructural norms of the country has been endemic and, in turn, paradoxically pathogenic. The noir context of systemic crime constructed by Black denotes the interconnection of the state artefacts as well as their biased interpretations of the official rules so as to secure their power and the impunity of the clerical figures, gravely ignoring the subsequent reproduction of vulnerability that such malpractices entail. Thus, this Quirke novel reinforces the idea that “badly designed social policy responses to vulnerability can also cause or compound major capability failure, thereby entrenching social inequality and injustice” (McKenzie 2014, 54). The author’s treatment of trauma and vigilantism as products of that major precarisation demonstrates that resisting the grip of the authorities is unequivocally arduous and a challenge that may generate further complications. This position certainly permeates his noir account of a state of diffuse justice and incomplete responsibility that linger up to the present, as many of its effects are still visible and its agents have not been fully made accountable. The novel

then, asks readers to think about the steps that need to be taken in Ireland so as to reach a social order in which, echoing Butler and Sabsay's arguments, the recurrent decentredness of vulnerable subjects is surmounted and the infrastructural conditions to which they are inexorably attached make lives fully livable.

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NOTES

1. The terms used throughout time in reference to this community include "tinker", "gypsy", "vagrant", "tramp" and "traveller", although in recent decades, "traveller" and "travelling people" are most consistently preferred. In this chapter, and following Black, I will use "tinker" and "traveller" interchangeably.
2. Black has provided quite significant insights into these social controversies in other titles of the series, like *Christine Falls* (2006) and *Even the Dead* (2015), *Elegy for April* (2010) and *A Death in Summer* (2011), respectively.
3. Since the 1990s, a large number of Church-related scandals have been aired with a great deal of shock and pain for the Irish population and the international community. The testimonies of survivors, as well as the campaigns of different advocacy groups and the attention from scholars, artists and cultural commentators have been crucial for the public rendering of criminal acts and procedures that had remained secluded and socio-politically untreated on a wide scale. Among such pervasive wrongdoing, the most prominent cases were the sexual abuses of children by the Catholic clergy in so-called Industrial Schools, the psychological and physical maltreatment of women in Magdalene Laundries, which were managed by religious orders, and the illegal adoption of babies born to women incarcerated in Mother and Baby Homes, that were state-funded but also run by the Church. For a detailed description of these controversies, see Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999), Smith (2007) and Milotte (2012), and for the latest analysis of their literary representations, see Valente and Gayle Backus (2020). Besides, the Irish cases obviously resonate with similar atrocities committed

- in other European countries, like the sexual molestation of children by the clergy in Spain, Poland and Italy, to name but a few, and the Spanish unsolved scandal of “bebés robados” (stolen children from single mothers and “unsuitable families” during Franco’s regime).
4. While falling out of the scope of this chapter, the discussion about the Irish travellers’ distinctive “way of life” has centred a wide number of approaches to the discrimination that they have experienced for centuries. This approach has actually displaced more common notions of race and othering, so that the differentiation of this community has led to the construction of concepts such as “neo-racism” or “culturalist racism” (Helleiner, 7–9).
 5. A quite useful glossary of words in Cant, the language of the Irish travellers, is included in the author’s note at the end of the novel. According to it, the word *mugathawn* means “fool”.
 6. For a gendered approach to anti-Travellers racism after the foundation of the Irish State, see Helleiner 67–68, and for the representation of traveller women in contemporary literature and cinema, see Terrazas-Gallego (2019).
 7. With Sally’s final retaliation, Black provides an invigorating gendered perspective of vigilantism that dismantles the masculinist connotations traditionally associated with the term. A similar rendering of the lone avenger through a gender-related prism and its subversion of the conventions of sovereign subjectivity is analysed in Guillermo Iglesias Diaz’s chapter included in this collection.

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PART II

Gender Vulnerability, Agency
and Interdependencies



Crime Fiction's Disobedient Gaze: Refugees' Vulnerability in Ausma Zehanat Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018)

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Crime fiction hinges on a breach of the social order that the intervention of a detective aims to correct, thereby generating in readers of the genre feelings of satisfaction, and meeting our very human need to feel safe. Thus, crime fiction simultaneously caters for our vicarious thirst for adventure and acknowledges our fear of death. In critiquing the genre, the means through which a resolution is achieved and the breach in the social order rectified—through trial by the criminal's peers, through an accidental death, or through a vigilante's execution, to mention but a few likely resolutions—can be considered extremely significant insofar as it conveys each author's ideological position on the social structures they

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are working within. However, these structures are most often national ones, as crime fiction (and particularly the subgenre known as “police procedurals”) is grounded in a nation-state judicial system, so international human rights usually remain beyond its bounds. Yet, this is the field explored since 2015 in Ausma Zehanat Khan’s series of mysteries led by two Canadian police officers, Esa Khattak and Rachel Getty. Khan, who holds a Ph.D. in international human rights and is a former adjunct law professor, targets in each of her novels international failures to protect human rights, usually in combination with an individual breach of the social order. Her first work, *The Unquiet Dead* (2015), uncovered a Balkan war criminal living under false pretences in Canada and used the police procedural form to address the legacy of the massacre of Srebrenica in 1995, a conflict to which her novella *A Death in Sarajevo* (2017a) would return. Her second mystery, *The Language of Secrets* (2016), was again set in Canada and dealt with the struggle to stop a terror attack, whereas the third *Among the Ruins* (2017b) moved to Iran to disclose the lack of rights of its citizens under an oppressive regime. Perhaps because an international scenario allowed the writer more leeway to frame such major questions, the fourth novel, *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018), has the two Canadian detectives sent to the Greek island of Lesbos to investigate the disappearance of a Canadian case worker for an NGO called *Woman to Woman*, which has suspiciously coincided with the killing of an Interpol female officer and a young male refugee at one of the camps.

Working thus at the intersection between human rights and the crime narrative, Khan’s mysteries use the latter to critique the former. Consequently, I argue that Khan’s crime fiction consistently exerts a “disobedient gaze” on the current international human rights situation, a term I borrow from Pezzani and Heller’s (2013) analysis of ongoing human rights violations in the Mediterranean:

The strategy that we have tried to mobilize in order to address this issue in our ongoing project Forensic Oceanography is to exercise a “disobedient gaze,” which aims not to disclose what the regime of migration management attempts to unveil—clandestine migration; but unveil that which it attempts to hide—the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome. (Pezzani and Heller 2013, 294)

Thus, although at first sight, Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* appears to follow crime fiction conventions in the search for the criminal, its larger mandate is to explore the plight of those caught between the borders of nation-states and without access to further mobility, mostly but not exclusively Syrian nationals stranded on the shores of Turkey and Greece, reached after escaping at considerable risk the dictatorial regime of Bashad-el-Assad and their war-ravaged homes. This novel, published in the United States under the equally significant title *No Place of Refuge*, unveils the extreme vulnerability of this population in the context of the much wider violence and general non-assistance policies carried out by European border management actors throughout the Mediterranean, an area that was described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as "the most deadly stretch of water for refugees and migrants in 2011" on a press briefing note published on their website (31/1/2012).

My main argument in this chapter is that *A Dangerous Crossing* makes a powerful critique of the failure of European states and transnational institutions to morally respond to the needs of a population whose vulnerability is context-specific but, through the negligence and shortcomings of those official agencies, actually borders on what Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds have termed "pathogenic vulnerability," resulting from "social policy interventions aimed to ameliorate inherent or situational vulnerability [that] have the contradictory effect of increasing vulnerability" (2014, 9). In that sense, the Mediterranean refugee crisis represented in the novel can serve to illuminate the complex materiality of vulnerability in migratory contexts closely connected to Fortress-Europe policies. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, I look into the tangled threads bringing together literature, international human rights, and their definition of the human through the lens of the European migrant crisis of the mid-2010s shown in Khan's police procedural. In the second, I examine more closely the overlapping forms of gendered violence bearing on Syrian refugees as depicted in the novel and tease out ensuing manifestations of vulnerability and resistance. Ultimately, my goal is to frame the question of whether the conventions of the crime fiction genre can appropriately be used for the advocacy of those placed in situations of high vulnerability and to overcome western readers' prejudices rooted in white privilege that circulate negative affects of hatred and fear against racialised bodies or that facilitate numbness to others' suffering. I

conclude that Khan's deployment of the crime genre and the "disobedient gaze" she casts in this novel aims to undo the epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2007) that often underpins racial and gender oppression and to further establish new "affective economies" (Ahmed 2004) that help us imagine an alternative epistemology of resistance to deeply entrenched forms of normalised injustice (Medina 2012).

6.2 LITERATURE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE HUMAN: THE CASE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Between roughly 2014 and 2019, the strict border management carried out within the European Union was thrown into disarray due to the massive arrival of refugees. Late in 2014, thousands of asylum seekers awaiting passage into the UK set up camp in Calais, while on several Greek islands, camps meant to accommodate only a few thousand filled with inmates way beyond their original capacity. Viewers around the world were shocked by mass-media circulated images of the appalling sanitary conditions in the camps, while the cost of innocent lives in transit towards more secure parts of the world was made evident in 2015 by the picture of Syrian three-year-old Alan Kurdi, dead on Turkey's shore. The combination of news and images in those years not only mobilised public opinion but also managed to convey to what an extent forced migration and statelessness challenged many deeply entrenched understandings of sociality and belonging in the West. Already in 1995, in a short essay entitled "We refugees," the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben demanded "a no-longer-delayable renewal of categories" (1995a, 117), pointing out that international refugee agencies established in the twentieth century (including the present UN High Commission for Refugees, active since 1951) were ill-equipped to deal with the problem adequately, so that "the entire question was transferred into the hands of the police and of humanitarian organisations" (1995a, 115–16).

Agamben has not been alone in pointing out how insufficient international human rights and human rights agencies are in addressing the problem of asylum. Insofar as sovereignty resides in a nation-state and its associated territory, international human rights are simply unattainable for many caught between borders, since those rights can only be realised within the context of the nation-state and their international institution, the United Nations. What's more, as Alexandra Moore has pointed out, the principles stated in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights are

“inseparable from European imperialism as a history of capitalist accumulation and its legacies” (2015, 5). This conundrum has intensified since the 1990s in the European context due to a chain of events: the fall of the Berlin wall, the Balkan war and the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the liberalisation of movement of people and goods within European Union territories deriving from the Shengen agreements of 1985 and 1995. Last but not least, European migration policies have been subjected to further stress from the increased border securitisation after 2001 connected to terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, and London, among other locations. The wars unfolding in the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria) together with the Arab Spring revolutions in several countries have likewise pushed millions of forced migrants out of their homes in search of safe routes into Europe starting from several Mediterranean hotspots.

The arts have not remained indifferent to this prolonged humanitarian crisis (or rather, series of crises). On the contrary, just a few months after the photo of young Alan Kurdi filled every screen on the planet, Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei replicated the image on the island of Lesbos, where he was working on an installation in memory of the migrants. Although to some this was a tasteless exploitation of the boy's untimely death, others interpreted it as an attempt to keep focused on the grievability of all human beings at a time when the shocking image was already fading from public attention, in line with Judith Butler's often quoted statement that:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (2004, xiv–xv)

Literature and the visual arts have the power to represent precisely “who is [not] normatively human” and to make visible the logics of inclusion and exclusion undergirding the concept of the human in human rights. As Nayar contends, “[c]ultural discourses and their texts, in many media forms and genres, tell stories of what it means to be human or to be denied humanity” (2016, xi). Not surprisingly, a remarkable number of novels and films since the 1990s have engaged in the portrayal of these tensions between the nation-state and the forced migrant. In Canada, one could mention Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005), Kim

Thuy's *Ru* (2009), Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009), Wayde Compton's *The Outer Harbour* (2014), and Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018), to name but a few published around the same dates of Khan's book release. A veritable explosion of scholarly interest in these works has followed, although, to be fair, the literary imagination has for a much longer time addressed the notion of the human and of human rights (Parikh 2019, 1). It is telling that two major academic presses in English (Cambridge UP and Routledge) have made available "Companion" books of essays on the subject lately. Together with a substantial outpouring of critical writing on what is variously called the refugee novel or human rights fiction (Farrier 2011; Anker 2012; Woolley 2014; Moore 2015; Nayar 2016; Gopal 2020), this attests to the growth of both public and scholarly interest in what has undoubtedly become a solid and highly productive interdisciplinary field.¹

However, crime fiction is not usually included in these studies, despite the genre's power "to educate readers and deliver social and cultural critique on compelling and urgent topical issues of its time" (Beyer 2020, 379). Beyer's interesting account of the intersection of migration and crime writing maps out how the latter has picked up highly politicised themes such as human trafficking or modern slavery, and how its generic conventions allow it to probe into the hidden face of migration, "cut[ting] through simplistic political and media discourses [and revealing] the complex and often horrendous realities behind the stereotypes" (Beyer 2020, 383). This is very much the case, I would argue, of Ausma Zehanat Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing*, in which the author displays a wide knowledge of the situation of displaced Syrians on Eastern Mediterranean shores. The poor living conditions on the camps that will be analysed below, the brutality, violence, and exploitation that seem to be part and parcel with the refugee condition, were all comprehensively researched by the Canadian author, as the "Author's Note" at the end of the book makes clear. There, Khan concisely reports the main events and consequences of the Syrian War at the time of writing the book (autumn 2017), including a death toll of half a million people and the displacement of eleven million more (six of them internally). She also sets down some of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the key players in the conflict, the dictatorial regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). A further two-page "Recommended Reading" section allows concerned readers to contrast her facts with a considerable number of books and international human rights

agencies' reports such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Moreover, in the "Acknowledgments," Khan claims to have conducted interviews with war refugees, government and NGOs employees, journalists, lawyers, volunteers, etc., to better understand the different aspects involved in the subject.

The novel's point of entry rests on the work of an NGO called *Woman to Woman* established by police officer Esa Khattak's sister and their friend Audrey Clare, who has gone missing during a visit to Lesbos, where the NGO had been operating for a year. On top of the disappearance, an Interpol officer and a young male refugee have been found dead, shot with Audrey's gun, and the NGO staff member in Lesbos, a former refugee herself, has been detained by Interpol. As a result, Khattak's involvement is double, both personal and political. Before the action moves to Greece, however, the initial chapters set in Canada carefully lay the groundwork to explicate for readers some of the complexities involved in this particular case caused by the global refugee situation described above. Khattak and his partner variously meet with politicians and NGO officers, from whom they learn about the shortcomings of the international Convention of Refugees to deal with the current situation of over sixty-two million displaced persons, and of the labyrinthine process of asylum applications that keeps refugees in camps for months or even years.² The dead boy appears to have applied for asylum in Canada, claiming to have family there that could sponsor him. Khattak and Getty's visit to the Fakhri family is extremely enlightening, as it awakens readers to some of the features that distance refugees from other migrants. Throughout the short interview, both Ahmed and Dania Fakhri exhibit obvious signs of fear and distress at being visited by police. When their child starts wailing and Rachel Getty picks her up to comfort her, they interpret it as a threatening move, expecting the officers to use the child as leverage to get information from them. Finally, Ahmed asks Khattak whether they are looking for a bribe and responds to his assurances that the police are there to protect them with "I can't pay for protection" (Khan 2018, 81). It is Esa Khattak's turn to feel distressed. He had not anticipated that Syrian refugees brought with them a deep distrust of the police forces due to their experiences in a corrupt, totalitarian regime where thousands of people have been tortured, imprisoned, and often "disappeared" or summarily executed on trumped-up charges. In Syria, the police *are* the enemy. His self-reproaches at his insensitivity are highly significant:

I couldn't have been more callous if I tried. We should have gotten background. We have no idea what this family has been through. We made this man think we were no different than the men who work for Assad. He was terrorized. *I'm* the one who terrorized him. And his wife." Now he did curse at himself. "God knows what she must have thought, what she's already been through. (Khan 2018, 82)

This scene establishes the double victimisation refugees are often subjected to by law enforcement, first in their home country and later in the host country.³ As a result, readers are encouraged to continue reading not just with an open mind but with clear empathy towards the suffering of refugees that the following chapters will dwell on in all its brutality. In fact, I will argue below that empathy is a key affect in Khan's novel that returns in several compelling scenes throughout the narrative and therefore plays a crucial role in the author's human rights advocacy.

Yet, the representation of these refugees as victims also unveils the deep inequalities implicit in humanitarianism and brings us back to the question of the human in human rights. For Fassin (2007), humanitarian action performs a politics of life in contrast to military action or the diverse forms of necropolitics carried out by certain regimes and institutions. However, since humanitarian action "is aimed at those who are considered at risk of physical disappearance and incapable of maintaining their own existence" (2007, 511), it essentialises the victims and places them in an unequal position in relation to those providing them with the aid they need. Fassin goes on to describe a triple set of ontological inequalities that are "constitutive of the humanitarian project and effectively insurmountable within the value systems of Western societies" (2007, 519).⁴ From this one might conclude, as Agamben did earlier, that the very categories of refugee/citizen require dismantling altogether.

6.3 REFUGEES' VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE: A DANGEROUS CROSSING

When the plot shifts to Greece in chapter twelve, Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* launches a double critique of two interlocking kinds of systemic violence that explains Syrian refugees' vulnerability. The first is the critique of state-sponsored violence, specifically in their case the one wielded by Assad's government, which has allegedly resulted in grave crimes against Syrian citizens both before and during the current conflict.

In the "Author's Note," Khan denounces the arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced "disappearances" tens of thousands of Syrians have been subjected to under this regime of terror, drawing from various reports by independent international agencies such as the already mentioned Amnesty International (2017) or Human Rights Watch (2015). Such agencies also assign responsibility for most civilian deaths during the war so far to Al-Assad's regime, in targeting civilian sites such as hospitals and schools and in deploying forbidden chemical weapons (Khan 2018, 339).

The body of the young man that had been shot to death in a refugee camp in Lesbos bears testimony to this serious accusation. Unclaimed by family, friends, and even governments, this young body eloquently tells a story of unspoken horrors to those able to read it, like the Greek pathologist and the Canadian detective Rachel Getty, who attends the post-mortem:

[The pathologist] pulled back the sheet that covered Sami's body with a prayerful murmur. Instantly, Rachel knew why.

The boy's body was scarred and bruised, marked and discolored from his sternum to his toes. Puckered round scars that peppered his torso looked like cigarette burns. There were jagged slashes through his flesh, wounds that hadn't been stitched... they looked more like they'd been cauterized. Some of the flesh looked sick, as if it had begun decaying long before his death. There were other signs Rachel recognized: broken bones that had never had the chance to knit or be repaired.

And the boy's testicles were missing.

She choked back the sob that rose in her throat, casting the good doctor a horrified glance. He was still praying to himself. (Khan 2018, 99)

This scene once more leans on the concept of empathy that is crucial to many refugee narratives (Goellnicht 2019). According to Anthony M. Clohesy, in the post-war period, empathy has become both "a condition for care and compassion" and an ability that can be and should be cultivated because it is "integral to the healthy emotional development of the individual and vital for the maintenance of a well-ordered society" (2013, 16). In the quote above, the pathologist, a figure of detached scientific demeanour, whispers a prayer, manifesting his compassion. The detective, another illustration of an objective point of view, is nonetheless horrified into a sob. Although crime fiction provides frequent descriptions of mutilated and injured bodies such as this one and the rhetorical technique of withholding the final revelation of its corporeal damage to the very end

to maximise readers' shock is not new in the genre either, the reactions of the onlookers are significantly meant to key us in as to what affects are appropriate in this context; our own reactions of horror and pity at the violence repeatedly inflicted on him are meant to mirror theirs.

As the narrative unfolds, the various wounds mapped out on this abject body will be traced back to a detention system that has annihilated thousands of real or imagined dissidents.⁵ While obviously the Canadian detectives in this fiction cannot possibly offer a solution to state-sponsored violence unfolding in Syria, yet the author manages to hint that some reparation may be achieved eventually. The tortured body's evidence, as well as other substantial intelligence secretly smuggled out of Syria, is made available to the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, an independent agency that documents war crimes *during* rather than after a conflict, so that the International Criminal Court may later prosecute them (Khan 2018, 243–245). Thus, Khan's narrative bolsters up faith in international human rights institutions and their defence of human rights, even though they can only provide a delayed, and thus ultimately unsatisfactory, kind of justice.

The second critique Khan builds into her work is aimed, as repeatedly stressed throughout this essay, at current migration management policies in Europe, and particularly at the sharp increase of refugee camps on its borders. Although originally designed as an emergency solution in extraordinary circumstances, they have now become the rule. This paradox was pinned down by Hannah Arendt decades ago:

No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as “inalienable” those human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves. Their situation has deteriorated just as stubbornly, until the internment camp—prior to the second World War the exception rather than the rule for the stateless—has become the routine solution for the problem of domicile of the “displaced persons.” (1973, 279)

A Dangerous Crossing depicts through the eyes of Khan's Canadian detectives three of these camps in Greece (two on Lesbos, one on Chios) and a fourth in Turkey, throwing into relief their numerous health and sanitation problems. The portrayal of those who do not have the right

to have rights dwells on the pitiful conditions and general abandonment and dehumanisation of the camps: “The first thing Esa noticed [...] was a concrete barrier painted over with slogans that read like cries of despair: no borders, no borders, no borders, the prayers of the stateless” (2018, 175). Furthermore, the refugee camp is rendered here along the lines of Eleni Coundouriotis’s description of a site of stasis that runs counter to the refugee’s pull to flight and movement (2016). The camp stands out for its atemporality; time has stopped here, leaving refugees’ lives suspended:

A generation was losing its childhood: six thousand children were trapped on Chios without access to education or adequate health care. All around the camps were groups of people, young and old, with no occupation, no chance of earning a livelihood, unable to return, unable to move on. The camps were not a permanent solution, yet no other solution had been proffered. (Khan 2018, 175–176)

Stranded between borders, these persons are left in a state of extreme vulnerability not only in terms of their mental or physical health, but insofar as they are sitting targets for many sources of violence. Verbal violence is widely spread; in the media, the language of hate is used to describe them as hordes, an invasion, a flood (Khan 2018, 130). Physical violence is often random but also occasionally organised by neo-nazi groups like the Greek party Golden Dawn, which in the novel assaults the Souda camp, hurling stones at the residents and torching their tents in the middle of the night (Khan 2018, 191–197).

Asylum seekers are also vulnerable to the exploitation of profiteers that promise to take them to safety, rings of smugglers who make their fortunes on people’s despair. Consequently, the detectives uncover a well-oiled machinery thriving on desperation (Khan 2018, 207) that organises routes to get refugees across without regard for their safety, with an eye only on its own profits. One of its most cruel scams, as the detectives find out, consists of making and selling counterfeit lifejackets that afford refugees a sense of safety on the overcrowded boats yet cause their drowning or their strangulation because they are hydrophilic and become a heavy weight around the neck (Khan 2018, 218).⁶

In addition, one can agree here with Domínguez García’s reminder that migrants are subject to a double condition, vulnerability as to themselves and risk as perceived by the host community (2016, 107). Gender

further intervenes in this condition, emphasising female vulnerability and male risk. Such differential treatment is rendered visible on several occasions. Before leaving Canada, a seasoned diplomat remarked to Khattak that boys on the verge of manhood are considered “the most dangerous creature in the world. There *is* no refuge for these boys” (2018, 39). Similarly, a young refugee perceptively sees himself through the eyes of the locals: “People were no longer seeing the boy Ali, in love with the girl, Israa. They saw a young man on the prowl, a predator who might strike, who needed to be contained. Kindness had become happenstance, too illusory to be prized” (Khan 2018, 151). As a result, young men travelling alone are last to qualify for visas and resettlement, they remain the undesirables (Khan 2018, 215). Similarly, female vulnerability is proportionately enhanced during transit, particularly for minors. The website of Missing Children Europe, the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children, mentioned by Khan in the novel, reports that tens of thousands of children in migration continue to go missing, to which the author adds that “a disproportionate number of minors are missing from the Turkish coast” (Khan 2018, 289). The central mystery that the Canadian detectives are meant to unravel is, as mentioned above, the disappearance of a Canadian female case worker, Audrey Clare, which in turn is tangled up with the disappearance of a Syrian refugee girl, Israa. It is only the Canadian tragedy that brings the spotlight on to the Syrian tragedy, which makes the narrator muse on the grievability of human life in words that powerfully resonate with Butler’s train of thought in *Precarious Life* (2004) cited above:

Police officers with their government’s backing were searching for Audrey Clare, dispatched by the fame and resources of her brother. Ali was searching for a girl among thousands of refugees, a girl without money and family, a girl whose dismal fate Esa envisioned as only a police officer could: she had drowned at sea, she had fallen on prostitution in Izmir, she’d been snatched back across the border, or she’d disappeared in the hands of smugglers.

One life was sought with crushing urgency; the other had vanished unremarked.

These were scales Esa had been weighing all his life, an actuary of the dead and disposable. (Khan 2018, 156–157)

Khan’s assessment of the differential value of these two women calls attention to the biopolitical economy of the disposable, with its entailing

categories of gender, race, or faith. The crime narrative opens up a space to unveil the often horrific forms of migrant exploitation that seldom reach the media. Refugee camps are notoriously unsafe places for girls and women, and sexual violence is much too often involved (Martín-Lucas 2010). However, the latter categories also weigh heavily against the refugees in this novel, since they are dark-skinned Muslims and so within the “global economies of fear since September 11” (Ahmed 2004, 128), they are cause for apprehension to Western eyes. Yet, the narrative presents them from the detectives’ viewpoint as what they truly are, children. On one occasion, some boys invited Khattak to join in their game, to everyone’s delight: “[Rachel had] seen another side to Khattak, laughing and affectionate with children who were thrilled to find someone who spoke their tongue—someone who looked like them [...] They’d teased him mercilessly, delighted to be teased in return” (Khan 2018, 144). This humanising representation in the generally dehumanising context of the refugee camp is fundamental because the detective constitutes the moral compass of the crime story, as s/he is the one identifying those responsible for the crime committed. In that sense, the detective must often balance “the judicial code against the moral code in order to arrive at a just decision about the distribution of responsibility and guilt” (Pyrhönen 1999, 18). Thus taking issue with western regimes of asylum, Khan’s crime narrative refuses to frame the refugee as nonhuman. Instead, affects towards refugees are redistributed through Khattak, who is at the same time one of us (western) and one of them (dark-skinned, Muslim); in the citation above and elsewhere, he is “someone who looked like them” by virtue of his Pashtun background. To be fair, this shift in the characterisation of the detective is not new, since crime fiction has long incorporated many different embodiments, including the “ethnic/minority sleuth” (Matzke and Mühleisen 2006, 5). Yet, in combination with the regular appeals to empathy with the refugee evenly distributed through the narrative, Khattak’s racialisation works to generate an alternative “affective economy” in Ahmed’s definition as those emotions that align individuals with communities “through the very intensity of their attachments” (2004, 119). In other words, western readers are brought into a closer relationality to the refugee. As a result, the ethnic detective becomes an instrument of the moral regime of the crime narrative, working to undo the “epistemology of ignorance” identified by Sullivan and Tuana (2007) as those instances in which a

lack of knowledge is actively produced in support of white privilege and supremacy.

A further, equally important tool for imagining this new affective economy is the representation of resistance through a young male refugee called Ali. His is an example of resistance drawing from vulnerability in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay's definition (2016) because it shows his vulnerability as empowering him for action rather than mooring him in the kind of inaction, passivity, and stagnation that the refugee camp stands for in the western imagination. First, Ali got the missing Canadian NGO case worker Audrey Clare involved in the disappearance of the girl Israa, with whom he had fled Damascus, and later in the narrative, he nudges the Canadian detectives on in the direction of his desires, feeding them information, providing contacts, and generally becoming the link between the refugee world and the outsiders. Ultimately, his resistance is enabling not just for him, but also for Israa and her little sister Aya, for it allows the detectives to uncover a trafficking ring that had been operating under pretence of humanitarian action, and to rescue both Israa and Audrey unharmed from them. This example of self-empowerment transforms a story of victimisation into one of action; Ali has instrumentalised for his own purposes the western mechanisms of law and order, and in so doing has undercut the affective functioning of humanitarian causes, that rests on "a moral call to appeal to the public to 'help the victims', and in so doing they reaffirm rather than question the borders of assigned injurability" (Sabsay 2016, 280). In addition, the fact that the source of the violence against women is a trafficking ring, rather than an isolated culprit, points readers towards a critique of systemic axes of inequality.

6.4 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS RESISTANT IMAGINATIONS

In *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012), Jose Medina argues that:

The imagination can be both empowering and disempowering. It can create and deepen vulnerabilities, but it can also make people stronger and able to resist. Different ways of imagining can sensitize or desensitize people to human experiences—not only those of others, but even one's own; they can make people feel close or distant to others—and even to aspects of themselves; and they can create or sever social bonds, affective

ties, and relations of empathy or antipathy, solidarity or lack of solidarity. (252)

Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* helps readers expand the limits of our imagination and with it "the very core of our moral sense and political agency" (Medina 2012, 256) by providing a moving picture of deep gender vulnerabilities demanding our empathy and by envisioning new affective economies that surpass the alienating anti-Islamic, anti-refugee language of hatred that often reaches us via the media. This task seems quite adequate for the vehicle of crime fiction, since its central function is no other than achieving justice for victims (Beyer 2020, 380). In that regard, the author uses the conventions of the crime genre and the plot of trafficking, already very familiar to consumers of popular culture (Domínguez-García 2016, 104) to mobilise our emotions towards refugees' extreme vulnerability and to strengthen our ethical and political sensibilities regarding their "bare life" outside of nation-state citizen rights (Agamben 1995b). This kind of mobilisation is in line with what Michelle Rodino-Colocino labels "transformative empathy," that is, a bridging of differences "promoting listening rather than distancing or looking at 'speakers' as 'others'" (2018, 97).⁷ It is transformative because it requires self-reflexion and is conducive to a change in our original assumptions, in contrast to a "passive empathy" that maintains extant differences untouched.

As analysed above, Khan's act of advocacy for Syrian refugees frames insightful questions about the material effects of current migration management practices in Europe and more widely in the West, and also addresses the very notion of the (gendered) human as the subject of international human rights and as the object of humanitarian action, finding them both wanting in many respects. The very fact that the criminal was preying on migrant female children and young girls, turning them into a lucrative business while posing as providing humanitarian assistance, is worth noticing insofar as it turns the politics of life of humanitarianism into a trading of life that characterises advanced capitalism and neo-liberal practices.⁸ Anti-refugee language tends to insist on the need to identify the "true" refugee from the "bogus" one, and on how impossible it is at times to tell one from the other. In this novel, however, there is no bogus refugee, just a bogus good Samaritan profiting from vulnerabilities created by the current regime of border securitisation and strict migratory regulations.

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NOTES

1. I am referring to *The Routledge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (2016) and *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (2019).
2. Puumala et al. (2017) provide an interesting account of the asylum determination process as situated between institutional practice and migration governance, between law and politics, international human rights and states’ sovereignty. They also explain how deeply the success of asylum applications rests on credibility.
3. I am grateful to Beatriz Domínguez-García for pointing this out.
4. For another take on humanitarianism in a different European context, see Elena Cantueso’s essay in this collection.
5. I am referencing here Kristeva’s definition of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982). For another reading of abjection in literature, see Elena Jaime de Pablos’s essay in this collection.
6. Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei singled out the lifejacket as a symbol of the refugee condition in his 2016 exhibition “Safe Passage.”
7. I am grateful to Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco for bringing Rodino-Colocino’s concept to my attention.
8. For other examples of capitalism’s trading on life see Rosi Braidotti (2013, 59).

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Detection, Gender Violence and Atkinson's Jackson Brodie Series

Beatriz Domínguez-García

7.1 INTRODUCTION

British novelist Kate Atkinson, author of the Jackson Brodie series, has shown her commitment to both popular genres and feminism. Since the publication of her first novel *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* in 1995, it could be contended that Atkinson's narratives are concerned with the representation of all the issues that women face just because of their gender, starting from neo-patriarchal norms and values still embedded in current society to the most brutal and physical form of gender violence: death.¹ Atkinson's work, up to now, can be divided into two distinct plot schemes: those novels with a young female protagonist, with the exception of *A God in Ruins* (2015), a prequel to *Life After Life* (2013); and the detective fiction featuring Jackson Brodie and spanning 2004–2019:

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Case Histories, *One Good Turn*, *When Will There Be Good News*, *Started Early*, *Took My Dog* and *Big Sky*.

In the latter, Kate Atkinson loosely employs the genre of detection, moving between the tradition of crime fiction and what Joyce and Sutton (2018) define as “domestic noir”, to create multiple mysteries all of them tied together and brought to closure around the figure of a detective.² Her use of the genre places her in this contemporary revision which was labelled as “humanistic crime fiction” by Marcia Muller in 1995 (although probably the term “empathic” is much more appropriate), containing a specific formula in which social critique is placed within the plot.³ The specificity of Atkinson’s commitment to this trend stands out in her portrayal not of the female detective/sleuth Muller signalled as rising at the end of the twentieth century, but of a male one. It seems evident that Jackson Brodie is created as the agent of change around whom closure, in traditional terms, is reached. However, social justice, the necessary outcome of this “humanistic” plot, is always denounced and never achieved, and a form of vigilante justice (taking the law in one’s own hands to punish criminals) is established. Hence, Atkinson’s detective fiction series examines in detail the assemblage of a neo-patriarchal network supporting not only inequality but also gender violence.

This representation of the modes of female coercion and invisibilisation, so familiar in Atkinson’s bildungsromane, is also at the core of the detective series. From *Case Histories* (2004) to *Big Sky* (2019), the last instalment so far, gender violence is central to the novels because the female corpses and characters who appear around the male detective are always victims, sometimes survivors, of this type of violence. Moreover, in some of them, Atkinson also explores how the survivors cope with their lives in a world in which they are forgotten by the institutions of law and order, as sometimes the cases are. In fact, the role of the detective always starts where the institutions of law and order stop. These plot devices articulate issues of vulnerability, resistance and autonomy in the actions performed not only by the male protagonist but also by these survivors of gender violence. These interlocked acts bear a direct consequence on the detective, in similar ways as contemporary crime texts do, that is, his gradual alienation from the institutions of law and order and more generally, his social isolation. This isolation reflects on the female victims and survivors’ obliteration in that they and their cases are conveniently forgotten by the institutions whose task is to watch over vulnerable subjects; hence, the detective enters the scene as a peripheral agent in

charge of bringing closure to some of the millions of cold cases that pullulate the justice system.

The success of the fiction series and its protagonist brought Jackson Brodie to the TV under the title *Case Histories*, commissioned by the BBC for one season, airing in 2011, and a second season, in 2013, slightly changing in format.⁴ Bringing a well-loved fiction character to the TV format was successfully achieved by enlisting actor Jason Isaacs, who had previously been the leading voice of an abridged audiobook. Throughout the episodes in the TV series, Jackson Brodie (Jason Isaacs) inhabits the urban space so popular in recent detection and penetrates the domestic sphere where most of the cases take place. His written popularity endorses the visual impersonation by Isaacs as a materialisation of PI Jackson Brodie. However, bringing a very complicated character to the TV format was much more problematical, as it will be shown in the following pages.

What follows is a comparative analysis of the two detectives, the written Brodie and the visual one, together with some of the female victims, to determine how the constraints of popular culture have transformed Atkinson's feminist view of vulnerability and autonomy into a palatable and neoliberal conceptualisation that erases the standpoint the novels make. The analysis proposed here will offer a reading of the contemporary depiction of the (male) detective based on Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds's taxonomy about vulnerability and Mackenzie's discussion of Martha Fineman's definition of autonomy; the reading will also include Judith Butler and Sarah Bracke's disquisitions about vulnerability and resistance; finally, the framing of (gender) violence in the texts will be understood under Hannah Arendt's concept of "arbitrariness" and Adriana Cavarero's study in *Horrorism* (2009) as extreme forms of oppression as analysed by Ann Cudd. This reading will be compared to visual representations of the genre in a transnational environment that reinforces both neoliberal concepts of autonomy and paternalistic attitudes towards female vulnerability.

7.2 EMPATHIC DETECTION

Violence and detection are offered by media as entertainment both through fiction and through reality by exploiting the publication of crime fiction in general terms and the coverage of fictionalised accounts of true

crime (Dowler et al. 2006). That crime texts traditionally endorse a well-anchored and recognisable social model is widely accepted by theorists of detection (Scaggs 2005; Ascari 2007; King 2014; Evans et al. 2019), who also acknowledge, however, that in recent decades, the detective has also become quite critical of the institutions of law and order as a witness to the horrors depicted. Be it the traditional or this new sort of protagonist, this restoration of the social system requires the detectives to reconstruct the story that led to the crime.

The popularity of crime and its transnational nature have been tackled by recent critical works. As Mary Evans stated, “crime is one of the central concerns of western societies, sometimes through a dramatic and sensational presence in the media, sometimes as a mundane part of twenty-first century life, but always a topic that excites attention and engages the attention of readers or viewers” (2009, 1). Additionally, Ascari acknowledges the turn from reason to emotion in the genre (2013). King proposed to “read crime fiction as an example of world literature” (2014, 10) but, despite this challenging statement, it is true that in recent years, the crime genre has a growing global popularity both in its written and visual forms. It is worth considering as well, as it is asserted in King’s study, that the crime genre did not usually travel safely through borders, considering the localised nature of the legal systems that supported the fictional texts. However, globalisation in the form of cultural imperialism beyond national boundaries has created an audience which is able to read crime in a fundamental Judeo-Christian mode of punishment, regardless of their local legal specificities.

The selling of TV products, such as TV dramas or “true crime” documentaries, to different local and national media networks also helps educate the viewer into the particulars of a given legislation against crime.⁵ Furthermore, the existence of international legislation and police collaboration among nations, provided by institutions such as the United Nations or the Interpol, additionally entails the creation of an international legal system that answers to international forms of crime. As Pepper and Schmid affirm in their introduction to the edition entitled *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction* (2016), “the global implications of the crimes being depicted (e.g., the link between individual or collective criminal acts and the exigencies of global capitalism) require new forms and new strategies of representation in order to do justice to a changed and changing world” (3). What they label as “hybridized forms of crime fiction” are the perfect example that

“facilitate critical reflection on the globalizing imperatives of capitalism” (Pepper and Schmid 2016, 3). Thus, in their proposition the genre is still portraying practices that are institutional and, at the same time, showing how states have been affected by both the transnationalisation of crime and the surveillance by state institutions in this transnational milieu.

It is no surprise then the role television plays in this transmission of globalised, or better: glocalised and hybridised forms of the crime genre. In fact, it could be contended that television has replaced the market square in audiences’ vicarious witnessing of justice and punishment. Following Bourdieu and Hall, television could be considered as the ideological construction of social legitimation, as the means by which these “glocal” texts are consumed by audiences around the world, in which this celebrated new detective is constructed. In recent years, several scholars have tried to explain the popularity this genre has acquired in the twenty-first century, with the explosion of nationalistic portrayals such as “Nordic noir”, “Emerald noir” or “postcolonial/transnational noir” (as some of the contributors to this volume explore) both written and visual; however, this diversification of crime has not involved a diminishing in the popularity of “Anglophone crime”, where the texts explored here belong to, or even its long-standing influence (King 2014, 8–10).

In addition, contemporary texts are populated with brutal scenes depicting physical violence, as well as a stubborn fixation with targeting females as victims, establishing gender violence as a central topic and women as a vulnerable group. The proliferation of women as victims in these texts creates the necessity to explore the feminist conceptualisation of terms such as autonomy, resistance and vulnerability, and their relationship with gender violence to refute the neoliberal paradigms at work. By defining “violence”, it seems that the conflicting definitions between feminism and neoliberalism are clearly delineated. It is true, as Hannah Arendt in her essay *On Violence* accepted, that “violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness” (Arendt 1970, 4); however, the general acceptance of this “unpredictability” blinds the perception of the actual act of violence as calculated. Even though Žižek’s distinction of the different types of violence, namely symbolic, systemic and personal (Žižek 2008, 1–2) will likewise be used, it seems that Arendt is offering a study on the institutional discourses that legitimate the use of violence while, at the same time, condemning it as a form of barbarism. This proposition is what makes Arendt’s conceptualisation of violence viable to analyse the violence that is exerted on women, because it is a form

of violence that is condemned by social institutions, yet still without a serious devotion to its eradication.

Zizek's division may sometimes obscure the relationship that exists between violence and power and turn what are examples of systemic and structural violence into just the personal mode, as they are represented in popular crime texts. In this respect, the detective—in general terms—is the agent that may be key to either obscure or clarify the legitimation of gender violence by stating how the violent crime was the doing of just the criminal or was a consequence of this institutional endorsement. Arendt's discourse on the legitimation of violence by social institutions enlightens why the texts are always explained through the perception of a Zizekian "personal" form of violence instead of forms of structural violence against women. Moreover, in Atkinson's texts, gender violence is not explained as the single work of a given criminal but is also emphasised as the role social institutions have in formulating and defining gender violence as the isolated work of a madman instead of accepting their compliance in maintaining it. This social critique that the protagonist of the novels is so keen to highlight and that is so evident in the written texts is one of the aspects that has been difficult to translate in the visual ones. Even though, in *Started Early, Took My Dog* (2010), Brodie asks himself "why did men kill women?" and reflects that throughout his career, he has never been able to answer that question (Atkinson 2010, 96), the simple fact that the question is posed mirrors what both audiences and theorists are also wondering about: the reasons behind the popularity of crime texts whose murdered female victims are the recipients of extreme and brutal male violence. The need to search for an answer, even if it sinks in only after three novels in which women are the targeted victims of the cases he investigates, makes it possible to understand these examples of gender violence alongside Adriana Cavarero's discussion of the coinage "collateral damage" (2).

In her work, Cavarero is intent on explaining that arbitrariness of violence and the vulnerability it entails. Her initial account of the term "collateral damage" to explain those examples of violence, which are deemed involuntary and thus inevitable (Cavarero 2011, 2), is perceived as just the way to legitimate forms of violence that are illegitimate according to social discourses, but which are labelled so by complicit institutions. Hence, the categorisation of gender violence as personal violence, following Zizek, creates the perfect excuse when describing this form of violence as "collateral damage" in the sense that it is performed by a

male individual who sets himself free from the control of the institutions that should prevent it. The trick then is served to the consumers of these forms of entertainment who see the “arbitrariness” of gender violence as a deviance from the institutional regulations of individuals, instead of a form of structural violence born out of millennia of a discourse of male supremacy. This inevitability of gender violence as a mode of isolated, individualised and Zizekian “personal” violence is what results problematic in the crime texts that populate the media.

Started Early, Took My Dog (2010), for instance, deals with a recurrent plot device in Atkinson, a cold case never fully investigated in which a woman was murdered by her policeman lover. The murderer’s superiors not only let the case go cold but also helped the lover to illegally give up in adoption one of the siblings born to the couple, a girl, and made the boy institutionally disappear by sending him to a religious orphanage under a false name. By denouncing the compliance of the institutions to cover the murder, Atkinson’s Jackson Brodie condemns the system that allows gender violence to continue, as well as it denounces the individual as the executioner of personal violence. In addition, Brodie erects himself as the witness, by his expertise as investigator, who can bring closure to the victim’s family. This classic reworking of the genre, giving a closure of sorts to the narrative, is not what makes Brodie part of the group of the “empathic” detectives so celebrated nowadays. In fact, his empathy towards not only the victim but also the survivors are born out of his own personal experience and the lack of closure for his sister’s rape and murder when he was a boy. As many other examples in this globalised genre, Brodie acts to repair what cannot be mended in his life, and, because his life has been touched by gender violence, Brodie is written as a male detective that shares “feelings and experiences” (Rodino-Colocino 2018, 96) with the victims and survivors. This empathy Rodino-Colocino is alluding to in her article explains his implication in the “case histories” that give the title to the first novel in the series and it also positions him as its main protagonist and centre. In addition, Brodie’s condition might also be understood as “permeability” in the term coined by Leticia Sabsay in her contribution to *Vulnerability in Resistance*, which she defines as the ability to affect and be affected by others (Sabsay 2016, 286). Permeability, then, Rodino-Colocino’s empathy, is related to affect; it is Brodie’s permeability to the vulnerability of both victims and the survivors that makes him an emphatic detective. In fact, it is in the section entitled

“Holy Girls” (Atkinson 2004, 353–363) that Brodie’s personal implication in the “cold cases” is clearly explained: in his teens, his sister Niamh was raped and murdered, and the “killer was never found” (Atkinson 2004, 363). Indeed, this encounter with gender violence explains not only his relationship with his daughter, on the one hand, but also his intention in solving the cases, on the other.

In the next two novels, references to his sister’s murder continue to appear and, when he accidentally “loses” the floating corpse of a young woman in *One Good Turn* (2006), Jackson’s memory goes back to the day his sister was rescued in the canal while he tries to secure the corpse of this new victim (Atkinson 2006, 139–141); moreover, Detective Sergeant Louise Monroe names the lost female corpse “Jackson’s girl”, making clear his own personal implication with the “unofficial” investigation which is about to start. In fact, at the end of the novel, Brodie makes clear that the dead girl has a name and people who miss her—her family back in Russia and her friends in Edinburgh—breaking the pattern of invisibility common in discourses about gender violence by social institutions (Atkinson 2006, 527).

In the third novel entitled *When Will There Be Good News?* (2008), Brodie is implicated in another search for a lost woman, this time a wife and mother, who is going to endanger Brodie’s future as detective, reluctantly. In a very Atkinsonian turn of the screw, the lost woman he finds and helps is the same lost girl he found years ago when her family was brutally murdered. Dr. Joanna Hunter, finally found when she frees herself after killing her kidnappers, requires Brodie to clean up the murder scene and dispose of the weapons that could incriminate her (Atkinson 2008, 444) and, as an accomplice, Brodie feels he has fallen on the other side of the Manichaeic duality of the genre (Atkinson 2008, 448). It seems that by helping this character and covering her manslaughter, Brodie is aware of their own vulnerability and the only available sources of resistance. In fact, these actions ground his characterisation into this new category of detective who acts with a compassion born out of their own shared experience and the knowledge of the inability of institutions to prevent gender violence. In addition, this example of vigilante justice is nonetheless quite common in contemporary crime texts which since the 1980s are keen to portray the autonomous male subject as the lonely hero.⁶

The fourth novel, *Started Early, Took My Dog* (2010), is where this critique of society is much more evident as the undercurrent that connects

the cases. Jackson Brodie is hired to find the birth mother of a young woman who has learnt she is adopted. By investigating this, the detective uncovers a plot in which the police and the social services worked together to cover the murder of a woman by her police lover and the illegal adoption of their daughter. At the same time, Brodie is accidentally entangled in a story in which a retired policewoman buys a little girl from his mother. His murdered sister Niamh resurfaces again to mark the “arbitrariness” of personal violence and the laxity of institutions in preventing it (Atkinson 2010, 464) both to excuse the buying of the little girl as the paralegal way to prevent her pathogenic vulnerability (which will be discussed at more length below) in the system and to account for the death of the young mother at the hands of her lover.

Big Sky (2019) is the only novel that is not covered by the TV adaptation. This text deals with recurrent topics, such as gender violence, trafficking and children abuse. Jackson Brodie, who has become a vigilante too, combines his “legal” PI office with this obscure task when he illegally liberates the victim girl of a male paedophile. Accepting the “job” of investigating who is following a Mrs Holroyd is what creates the chaotic environment Atkinson best qualifies for as a writer. However, Jackson Brodie is incapable of closing the cases, and the client herself has to intervene to find any sort of justice: “despite her conclusions about Jackson Brodie’s general incompetence, Crystal felt safer with his presence in the house, although she would never have admitted that to him” (Atkinson 2019, 380).

For obvious reasons, the TV series does not follow the events at the same pace; *Case Histories* (2011, 2013) comprises two seasons: a first season consisting of six episodes, two for each of the first three novels (*Case Histories*, *One Good Turn* and *When Will There Be Good News?*), and a second season consisting of three episodes, one dealing with the fourth novel, *Started Early, Took My Dog*, and two extra episodes, “based on the characters created by Kate Atkinson”, as it is announced in the DVD case. In the visual text, Brodie’s exposure to gender violence is revealed quite early in the narrative; that is, the unsolved rape and murder of his sister Niamh: images of a very young Brodie are superimposed on the actual Brodie revealing the moment when his sister’s corpse is rescued. This recurrent memory is what makes Brodie an “empathic” detective, as it has been anticipated earlier, since Brodie is well aware of how easily society forgets the violence that is exerted on women.

This trait in the characterisation of contemporary fictional detectives makes them realise how complicit institutions are in pointing to the wrong causes of gender violence in contemporary society. Besides, this humanisation of the traditional nineteenth-century detective, who seemed not to be affected by the horrors encountered, is clearly rooted in the conception of human vulnerability. By depicting vulnerable subjects as agents of law and order, the narratives manage to manifest a more empathic treatment of the cases and the (vulnerable) victims.⁷ All in all, this humanisation serves its purpose of focusing on the issue of (gender) violence and female vulnerability. Vulnerability has been broadly defined as a condition of human life that makes humans fragile and dependent on external conditions (Butler 2004; Mackenzie et al. 2014, among others). The condition of human vulnerability is also rooted in our physical bodies, and the concept has been the object of an in-depth study by Mackenzie et al. in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Philosophy* (2014). These theorists define three different sources of vulnerability: inherent, situational and pathogenic (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 7–9) as intrinsic to the concept itself. Whereas “inherent” and “situational vulnerabilities” are part of our corporeal nature, pathogenic vulnerability seems to imply that living in groups facilitate that human beings fall to forms of vulnerability specific to social interaction. It seems that this “pathogenic vulnerability” is the source of vulnerability that is required to read Atkinson’s detective series, because of the implication of society as the locus where it is encountered. These theorists expose that “pathogenic vulnerabilities” “may be generated by a variety of sources, including morally dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships and sociopolitical oppression or injustice” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 9); yet, more strikingly, “pathogenic vulnerabilities may also arise when a response intended to ameliorate vulnerability has the paradoxical effect of exacerbating existing vulnerabilities or generating new ones” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 9).

In Atkinson’s series, from the very first instalment of *Case Histories* (2004), the vulnerabilities both the protagonist detective and the victims suffer, be them the murdered females or their close relatives, are subjected to refer to this third source Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds develop. In Atkinson’s texts, pathogenic vulnerability is mainly caused by “abusive interpersonal and social relationships” related to gender violence, as it happens in the opening case in *Case Histories* (2004) which uncovers the story of the abusive father that causes his molested daughter to murder her younger sister in an attempt to prevent her from becoming another of

her father's victims. Furthermore, in the subsequent novels in the series, the consequences of that pathogenic vulnerability which is signalled by the "responses intended to ameliorate vulnerability" are also present. In them, Atkinson emphasises the indifference of the institutions involved, highlighting their general lack of interest in performing the work of social justice. Moreover, Brodie's control over these messy events is elusive, since Atkinson's plots contain entangled histories of oppression, such as trafficking, illegal adoptions, family massacres, or child abuse. These twisted plots are generally a way of showing how vulnerable women are, and how the source of this vulnerability is mostly pathogenic.

What all these female (dead or alive) victims have in common is the source of their vulnerability and, as Judith Butler has signalled, the danger here resides in their being marked as vulnerable, for these female victims of gender violence are "fixed in a political position of powerlessness and lack of agency" (Butler 2016, 24). Given that "all the power belongs to the state and international institutions that are now supposed to offer them protection" (Butler 2016, 25), the survivors suffer at the hands of the very same institutions that should protect them. Hence, Atkinson does not maintain a discourse of female vulnerability that is based in inherent or situational sources, as typified by Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds, but clearly denounces that these sources of vulnerability are at the root of society and the institutions that support it. The accusation is articulated through the detective that closes all these cases, becoming little by little as alien to the social institutions as the victims are.

The nature of the protagonist detective's own vulnerability and guilt, namely the lack of closure for his sister's murder, does not only create the empathy necessary in these crime texts. It is also the way Atkinson explores the complex nature of the characterisation of the protagonist of the genre in its contemporary formula. By helping the survivors overcome the source of their vulnerability and by closing the cases he has been involved with, Brodie doubles as also the victim of pathogenic vulnerability. In his case, the institutions he once served and the laws he once obeyed are rendered useless to prevent the actual violence that both the murdered victims and the surviving females endure and thus, he has no other choice than to act outside the limits imposed by the legal frameworks presented in the novels. This widely accepted paralegal and vigilante justice Brodie is increasingly applying separates him from mainstream society, equating his performance with that of the female survivors that surround him whose marginality is well established in the novels; in

Started Early, Took My Dog, Brodie looks back to a previous case and reflects how his acts are placing him outside the law (Atkinson 2010, 55). This marginality is what accounts for that “powerlessness and lack of agency” Butler associated with “groups marked as vulnerable”, as female victims of gender violence usually are not only in legal discourses but also in fictional ones. However, with the help of this empathic detective, these female victims are able to prevail and “resist” the sources of pathogenic vulnerability they have endured.

Interestingly enough, the novels do not fall into the neoliberal trap of promoting resilience but create an alternative that can be explained through Sarah Bracke’s discussion in “Bouncing Back” (2016) where she provides a profound analysis of the concept from a feminist standpoint to validate the use of the term resistance. With this proposition in mind, the female victims who survive “resist” pathogenic vulnerabilities and show the compliance of institutions when dealing with gender violence. However, their resistance is not enough to position them back in their rightful place in society. With Bracke’s rejection of the term resilience as a neoliberal trap and her advocacy of the term resistance, another term debated in feminist theory may be useful to present what the novels adhere to. Catriona Mackenzie, in her own contribution to *Vulnerability* (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 33–59), advocates the creation of “an ethics of vulnerability” to foster an understanding that “seeks to dissociate the concept from negative connotations of victimhood, helplessness, neediness, and pathology, reconceptualizing vulnerability as an ontological condition of our embodied humanity” (Mackenzie 2014, 33).

For Mackenzie, it is important to reframe the concept of autonomy in feminist terms and establish the modes in which a non-neoliberal concept of autonomy could be made to respond to situations of vulnerability. This theorist accepts that the traditional “rhetoric of autonomy” implies a neoliberal individualism that excludes state intervention, which clashes with the ethics of vulnerability, she proposes and thus she advocates to move from autonomy to “relational autonomy” so that it is easier to understand how the term is influenced and influences the concepts of vulnerability and justice (2014, 36–37). All in all, her discussion aims to foster an understanding of autonomy that is devoid of the paternalistic forms of intervention that feminist philosophers such as Judith Butler have denounced in their disquisitions about vulnerability. The usefulness of Mackenzie’s proposition is grounded in the acknowledgement of human vulnerability as corporeal, and the need to establish an ethics of

vulnerability that does not reinforce victimhood or dependence, as Butler herself advocated, but helps to prevent it. Mackenzie then proposes to explore how “pathogenic vulnerabilities” are also present in situations of vulnerability to understand how these are forms of oppression that enhance situational vulnerability (2014, 39–40). With these specifications in mind, Mackenzie advocates a redefinition of the concept of autonomy and strips it from its neoliberal sense of promoting individualism and resilience, to work towards an understanding of autonomy which includes a “relational” component. For this reason, Mackenzie develops her view of how this new conceptualisation of autonomy could help issues of vulnerability and states: “first, to counter the sense of powerlessness and loss of agency that is often associated with vulnerability; and, second, to counter the risks of objectionable paternalism” (2014, 45). In fact, she advocates to work specifically within these parameters to avoid, as Butler already exposed, “powerlessness and lack of agency” (Butler 2016, 25) that could “generate pathogenic forms of vulnerability” (Mackenzie 2014, 47). This reframing of the concept of autonomy is what can be seen in Atkinson’s detective series, not only in the behaviour the female victims/survivors enact but also in the way Jackson Brodie fares through the cases.

As mentioned above, in *Started Early, Took My Dog* (2010) a retired policewoman bought a little girl from her mother; this plot runs parallel to another much earlier story in which a girl was illegally given away in adoption. Both are connected through the retired policewoman, as she had been the rookie agent that had discovered the second girl’s murdered mother. In the novel, the policewoman’s learning curve towards autonomy is clearly shown in her behaviour: she now tries to justify her buying of the little girl as a sort of rescue and she uses her knowledge of crime to buy new identities for her and for the girl, both clearly illegal actions. The retired policewoman, no longer that naïve rookie, has lost her faith in the system. She now understands that the institutions themselves are complicit in girls’ and women’s vulnerability and that the line between crime and justice is rather blurred. In that sense, she is performing the sort of autonomy that Mackenzie has described even though she is acting outside the law, and therefore has moved beyond the pale, to the side of the criminals. However, in the second season of the TV series, the one that adapts the plot of *Started Early, Took My Dog*, it is Brodie (Jason Isaacs) himself who contacts the identity thief on behalf of this policewoman, performing for the media what seems a complete

reversal from the written Brodie. This visual Brodie (Jason Isaacs) is thus transformed into the paternalistic male hero who epitomises neoliberal (male) autonomy and accepts to act as a (patriarchal) male protector of a group, women, who have been deemed vulnerable and, thus, powerless and lacking agency.

In her study *Analyzing Oppression* (2006), Ann E. Cudd undertakes to offer a “conceptual analysis of the term” (vii) as she understands “that the fundamental injustice of social institutions is oppression” (2006, ix). For “institutions”, she describes “formal and informal social structures and constraints, such as law, convention, norms, practices, and the like” as well as “social institutions as the media and popular or high culture” which “fail to treat individuals as moral equals” (Cudd 2006, 20). Cudd also analyses a type of violence, systematic violence (2006, 89), which is exerted to maintain oppression from one group to another and centres her example on “violence against women”, which, according to her, is “invisible”, “diffuse, and often literally hidden enough to appear unsystematic” but “widespread and recognizable enough to discipline women to stay within what is normatively termed their natural place” (2006, 86). It is this insight into gender violence which seems adequate to explain the proliferation of crime texts featuring extreme violence against women. In fact, *Big Sky* (2019) features all possible forms of gender violence from child molestation to trafficking in what seems an attempt to narrate a full catalogue of the horrors women suffer every day to be disciplined. The survival of Tina/Christina/Crystal is written as a form of resistance that fits into her predecessors in Atkinson’s texts. In the end, it is Crystal who saves herself and her family due to “Jackson Brodie’s general incompetence” (Atkinson 2019, 380) in discovering who is threatening her. In contrast, the BBC two extra episodes of the TV series continue to portray a very different Brodie (Jason Isaacs), the autonomous detective that erects himself as the neoliberal protector that was discussed above. Crystal could be read alongside with Cudd’s proposition to define oppression: brought to foster care when she was a child, Crystal was completely powerless to prevent her being abused by the “benefactors” that visited the centre; when Crystal finally leaves that circle and marries, her life is turned upside down when she discovers that her husband was not only part of the gang that abused her but also a sex trafficker. For Crystal, there is no other end than to kill her husband and run away again.

Crystal’s autonomy and resistance to the oppression perpetrated through gender violence by both society and the institutions that should

have protected her are clearly opposed to Jackson Brodie's inability to do so. In this instalment in the series, Brodie, even though he still works within the parameters of empathy, is no longer the figure he was in the first novel. His incapability to help all the victims around him further enhances the instability of his role as male protector. In fact, it could be contended that, even in his vigilante role, Jackson Brodie has little power to undo the work of gender violence. In all, Brodie is revealed as an empathic member of society whose vulnerability as an individual prevents him from adopting the role as detective he still possesses: to become the protector, legally or illegally, of the victims that ask for his help.

7.3 CONCLUSIONS

As Cudd affirms, oppression as injustice is a form of dehumanisation (2006, 24). In the analysis provided in these pages of the representation of gender violence in Atkinson's detective series, both the victims and survivors and the protagonist detective are dehumanised by the institutions that create pathogenic vulnerability by endorsing a form of individual violence which targets women. Brodie's empathic "permeability" (following Sabsay's definition) in his response to these victims and the paralegal actions he consequently undertakes influence his alienation from this social structure that exhorts vulnerable populations to become resilient in neoliberal terms, as Bracke clearly exposes (2016, 71–72). The understanding of their autonomy in relational terms discloses the neoliberal trap at work in media discourses which place the burden of survival on the targeted population of gender violence while perpetuating traditional discourses on their inherent vulnerability instead of working to end the causes of its pathogenic source. Moreover, popular media entertainment, as the TV adaptation has shown, continues to reinforce this neoliberal discourse to obscure society's blame in perpetuating violence towards women. The popularity of crime texts in mass media inculcate women the idea that gender violence cannot be prevented, and thus (one) they still are in need of a paternalistic form of protection and (two) they have to waive their rights to prevent it from happening. Finally, the theories used to read both the written series and its visual adaptation provide tools for understanding the implication of media in the perpetuation of neo-patriarchal values.

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NOTES

1. The term neo-patriarchal is used following the definition proposed by Habiba, Rabia and Ashfaq in their article “From Patriarchy to Neopatriarchy: Experiences of Women from Pakistan”, published in 2016: “This form of power named neopatriarchy is a different and a new concept related to household power hierarchies which disadvantages women in many ways. One of the many outcomes is domestic violence due to clash of interest in the game of power and control. Neopatriarchy is a new form of governance over women in the family, which is functioned through different types of violence to suppress the woman’s identity and create dependency in the family” (Habiba et al., 212).
2. Joyce and Sutton (2018) clarify the current popularity of this subgenre “that deals with domestic, intimate, and sexual violence, that deals with a lack of recourse for victims, and that asks questions about the safety, rights, and freedoms of those most vulnerable in society” (1).
3. The use of the term “empathy” throughout this piece follows the definition given by Rodino-Colocino in her article “Me Too, #MeToo: Countering Cruelty with Empathy”: “the sensation of shared feelings and experiences, into toppling systems of oppression and its attendant cruelty” (2018, 96).
4. In fact, Jackson Brodie briefly existed in Twitter from 2010 to 2011 as @jacksonbrodie.
5. For another take on the subject of detection and nation-state borders, see Cuder-Domínguez’s essay in this volume.
6. For another discussion on vigilantism, see Iglesias-Díaz’s and Pérez-Vides’s essays in this volume.
7. Some instances would be British TV dramas *Broadchurch* (2013), *Luther* (2010) or *Marcella* (2016), among others, and Spanish ones *Plastic Sea* (2010), *El príncipe* (2014), *Malaka* (2019) and, for the sake of a comparative analysis between a written series and its adaptation, the Netflix adaptation of Dolores Redondo’s *The Baztán Trilogy*.

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Resisting Binaries: Vulnerability, Agency and the Sovereign Subject Through a Feminist Critical Gaze

E. Guillermo Iglesias-Díaz

As several specialists have pointed out (Hardt, Bracke, McKenzie et al., Clough or Butler et al. among others), vulnerability as opposed to resistance and agency is a simplistic and reductionist opposition of the binary kind: vulnerability should be understood as a relational concept which challenges, among other concepts, the masculinist and (neo)liberal myth of the sovereign subject. If we agree with Teresa De Lauretis when she links gender to both representation and self-representation with “various social technologies, such as cinema” (1987, ix), then it seems just as natural that one of the best locations to problematize with gendered issues such as vulnerability, agency and the sovereign subject is the cinematographic text and, in this sense, Andrea Arnold’s filmography offers

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representative examples. This paper will examine Arnold's *Red Road* as a case study of how to challenge these concepts.

What I wish to analyze specifically in this chapter in the first place is the way in which Andrea Arnold approaches the film narrative, applying the concept of the critical gaze used by Judith Halasz to her film and how she uses that self-conscious approach in order to open a dialogue with the spectator about the ambivalence of the characters in the film in terms of their vulnerability and agency. In addition, drawing from Teresa De Lauretis, I will pay heed to the technologies of gender and how Arnold inverts the roles traditionally assigned in film: while the female body is usually the object of the gaze, in *Red Road* it is the male character the one under Jackie's scrutiny, a strategy which Arnold uses to question the myth of the sovereign subjectivity. Relying on theories by Butler, Clough or Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds about vulnerability, my focus then will be on Arnold's ambiguity when introducing the protagonists in the film, presenting them as both vulnerable but with full agency and never as victims.

A good starting point, thus, could be Laura Mulvey's theories about the male gaze that structures all cinematic experience and question, indeed, whether there might be any kind of crack to resist that gaze: of course we know it is not enough having a female body as subject of the enunciation and/or focalizer in the narrative.¹ Silvia Bovenschen wondered in the 1970s whether there could be something like a "feminine aesthetic" and the only possible answer she conceived of was "yes and no": "Certainly there is, if one is talking about aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception. Certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art" (quoted in De Lauretis 1987, 127). Arnold's style is a combination between realism and "an emphasis on appearance and representation" which, according to Moya Luckett, is characteristic of British cinema (Luckett 2000, 88). Her films have been labeled variously as "angry social drama", "social realism", "poetic social realist art cinema", "post-social realist abstraction" or "art film", but I agree with Jonathan Murray when he points out that Arnold's "cinema could be said to manifest an almost adversarial relationship with the real, determined to see what lies beyond" (Murray 2016, 199). Andrea Arnold's selected film, *Red Road*, might serve as a good example of how to challenge through a feminist critical gaze received assumptions about the cinematic form and

also about traditional understandings of vulnerability and agency which constitute the focus of my analysis.

The short synopsis of the film included in the production notes tells us that “Jackie works as a CCTV operator. Each day she watches over a small part of the world, protecting the people living their lives under her gaze. One day a man [Clyde] appears on her monitor, a man she thought she would never see again, a man she never wanted to see again. Now she has no choice, she is compelled to confront him”. The melodramatic tones in which the conflict is introduced are remarkable but, as the cultural product any given narrative film is, its success depends on its popularity and the box office: we know Clyde has caused Jackie some terrible wrong though, contrary to genre conventions, we will not learn about it until the last part of the film. However, what I find particularly interesting in the synopsis above is the fact it is a female body the one who “watches over” and protects “the people living their lives under her gaze” in a “small part of the world”, and how it is a male body the one objectified under her scrutiny, setting the film at a far remove “from the traditional positioning of female characters in dominant Anglo-American cinema” (Bolton 2011, 1): *Red Road*, in this sense, belongs to that kind of films that “feature lead female characters who are unusual in their occupation of screen space and time. The emphasis is not on the physical appearance of the women; rather, it is on their interiority” (Bolton 2011, 1). We find thus an inversion of roles and a specificity about location which will be dealt with throughout the following pages.

Even if I do not intend to defend that the “true meaning” of a film can be found in the opening sequence, I do think that in this particular case Arnold sets the lines of her formal approach to the story, her “critical gaze”, in these initial moments. On a dark screen, we make out some lights out of focus which, after a few seconds, turn into blurred screens (0:00:15): far from the traditional understanding of the “visible” as direct access to knowledge in a transparent and unproblematic way, *Red Road* is a challenge to that “ideology of direct, devouring, generative, and unrestricted vision, whose technological mediations are simultaneously celebrated and presented as utterly transparent” (Haraway 1991, 189). Arnold establishes an audiovisual conversation, as Gianfranco Bettetini would say, that reveals her understanding of images as always mediated, as texts to be deciphered. Moreover, she includes Jackie as the subject in charge of that mediation,² in a kind of *mise en abyme* structure which makes an implicit reference to the filmmaker. Furthermore, the way

in which the main character is introduced is also noteworthy: the extreme close-ups set the film at a far remove from the realist representation and its ideological implications,³ perhaps underlining it is from the embodied experience and reality of this woman that we will get the situated knowledge about the events narrated in the film. Donna Haraway has claimed that

our insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision (though not necessarily organic embodiment and including technological mediation), and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment [...], allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity. I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense. (Haraway 1991, 189)

Placing a female body and her routines as holder of the gaze is understood in some quarters as a first step toward resistance, attributing “subversive qualities to the female body by viewing it as an epistemological resource through which to challenge patriarchal knowledge, meanings and values” (Howson 2005, 133). In case the “subversive qualities” of the female body as “epistemological resource” are not extraordinary enough, the length of the shots and the fact there is no sound adds to the strategy of estrangement used by Arnold: this “very camera technique, the mediated gaze, [...] by lingering too long, reminds us ‘we are voyeurs’” (Halasz 2011, 31), making us uneasy as we are aware of our own look. That is, Arnold proposes an alternative ordinary, understood as “an intersecting space where many forces and histories circulate and become ‘ready to hand’ [...] for inventing new rhythms for living, rhythms that could, at any time, congeal into norms, forms, and institutions” (Berlant 2011, 9) and offers alternative realities to those put forward by the male gaze. Arnold plays with opposed meanings and cinematographic conventions throughout the film, challenging easy assumptions not only about the cinematic form itself, but also about some key issues such as the agency and the vulnerability of her characters, putting on the table “a feminist theory of gender [which] points to a conception of the subject as multiple, rather than divided or unified, and as excessive or heteronomous” (De Lauretis 1987, x).

The camera in the opening sequence shows Jackie embodying the gaze, literally (0:00:44): what we see first are her hands (she is applying hand

cream while observing the screens), shots of her fingers manipulating the cameras will often fill the screen and her body, dressed in her uniform as an officer of law and order, therefore with full agency, whose body moves with what she sees in the monitors. It is in this context, in the repeated extreme-close-up shots of Jackie's face watching (0:0046), her hands controlling the cameras (0:01:05), her facial expressions (0:01:35), her body language and the way she moves forward when interested in something in particular, that Haraway's "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1991, 111) gets full force, a knowledge that is sieved through personal experience and affects, at a far remove from the alleged objective distance of modern Reason.

Martha Nussbaum seems to share Haraway's position when she contrasts the Kantian conception of personhood, based on our "capacities for moral reason and freedom" with a more "Aristotelian/Marxist tradition" that understands "human reason and morality [as] interwoven with human animality, vulnerability, and bodily need" (quoted in Mackenzie et al. 2014, 5). Arnold's approach to Jackie as the focalizer of the narrative and the shots she uses to introduce her is in consonance with these postulates. Arnold, with Haraway, vindicates vision, which has been described as a "much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse": contrary to this position, Haraway defends that "vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions. I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere" (Haraway 1991, 188). Andrea Arnold wants to set a distance with the (post)modern gaze "that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation, [a gaze which occupies] the unmarked positions of Man and White" (Haraway 1991, 188).⁴

Halasz applies the concept of "critical gaze" to a film by Godard, but I think the definition fits Arnold's strategies perfectly well:

The critical gaze foregrounds certain ideological structures [inviting] the viewer to critically engage with what they see, both in form and content. [...] The critical gaze induces dialectical spectatorship, in that it keeps pleasure and displeasure simultaneously in play. In a reflexive moment, this returns our gaze back onto ourselves. Viewing the object compels us to acknowledge how our subjectivity [...] is predicated on object relations [...]. Subject and object are constantly playing off each other. This

produces an active engagement with the text and makes spectatorship a more reflexive, self-conscious activity. (2011, 30)

As a result, we could say Arnold portrays Jackie and Clyde not so much as (sovereign) subjects and (passive) objects, but as “quasi objects/quasi subjects”, because while “objects and subjects have attributes and form categories, [...] quasi objects/quasi subjects have tendencies and affects” (Gilbert 2007, 95). In this sense, the spectator is drawn into the film not so much by an easy identification with a main character but, quite the opposite, by the invitation to an active reflexion in Brechtian fashion.

Arnold problematizes the agency of the characters and their individual and situational contexts but also her own gaze. Therefore, Arnold’s film may be defined as an act of resistance to hegemonic cinematic representations and the traditional understandings of individual agency “in terms of impermeable plenitude and sovereignty of selfhood” (Athanasiou 2016, 275), as opposed to vulnerability. As Sue Thornham points out, “if Jackie’s screens position her above and outside the city, [...] then her use of those screens is very different, seeking always to approximate the intensity of touch, with an empathy that is enacted through her body” (Thornham 2016, 141–142). Arnold seems particularly interested in challenging the binaristic distinction between mind and body, so dear to modern thinking and scientific objectivity, and adopts “the philosophical system of Baruch Spinoza [whose] notion of affect inhabits an unresolvable tension between mind and body, actions and passions, between the power to affect and the power to be affected” (Athanasiou et al. 2008, 6). Furthermore, the filmmaker seems to apply Gilbert’s view when she points out the assemblage produced between “the seen and grasped object, one unit of eye-brain-hand-brain-object time describing the unit of time in which one sees and grasps an object and thus knows it. This moment of being *cannot* be subdivided into the time it takes to know as separate from the time it takes to see and the time it takes to grasp” (Gilbert 2007, 92); Arnold shows us how Jackie *knows* through her body and her body, her *self*, is informed by her knowledge.

If Jackie represents the embodiment of the gaze, the male body in the film is associated in a straightforward way with location: not in vain, the male protagonist, Clyde, is named after the river which gave Glasgow and Scotland a notorious position as an international trade port since the eighteenth century. By giving that name to the male protagonist, Arnold turns the world of Modernity upside down once more, as it has been the

female body the one which has been traditionally used as a metaphor of new lands to be explored by the European male in the colonial quest. Furthermore, the Clyde can be understood not only as a metonym for Scotland, but also as the myth par excellence of the modern Scottish nation: in addition to the romantic tropes of the Kaylyard and Tartanry, Donald Petrie defines “clydesidism”, as a myth which deals with “the very different set of concerns that informs the representation of urban Scotland as a site defined by industrial activity and working-class leisure” (Petrie 2000, 8–9), a myth that is typically embodied by “a skilled male worker who was man enough to ‘care’ for his womenfolk” (Petrie 2000, 7). In *Red Road*, however, Clyde, unemployed as he is, is far from the myth of the skilled, male worker and closer to the epithet “Clyde-built” which, in contrast to the ship-building guarantee of a glorious Scottish past, became a synonym of “a particular kind of hard-living, hard-drinking, working-class masculinity” associated more and more “with violence and criminality rather than hard work” (Petrie 2000, 80).

Arnold turns Clyde’s body into the object of the gaze, and it will be through Jackie’s eyes that we will know about him: he has been in prison for ten years (although the reasons are not explained until the film is well advanced) and he is currently unemployed and living at Red Road flats, two huge towers in Glasgow which were once the tallest buildings in Europe, where refugees, asylums seekers and the disenfranchised used to live.⁵ In short, the way in which Clyde is introduced in the narrative speaks of his vulnerability and objectification, with Jackie watching him having sex in a plot of waste ground, deprived of any human dignity (0:15:15). Lance Hanson, who has analyzed the representation of this kind of spaces in Andrea Arnold’s films, defines them as “edgelands”, liminal spaces “that exist at the interstices of the built, urban environment and the wildscapes beyond. Perceived as a threat to the norm and to the stability of the psychic, social and geographical body, they are often codified as abject spaces” (Hanson 2015, 2): in this case, Arnold seems to be establishing a relation between Clyde and Julia Kristeva’s theory about the abject.⁶ Clyde’s animalization (with all the racist implications related to colonization) further contributes to this, and it is a constant throughout the film: after recognizing him on the screen, Jackie tries to keep track of Clyde and sees instead an urban fox crossing the street, establishing an evident parallelism (0:17:00); later in the film, one of his girl friends will call him a “fucking beast” while he licks a dish lasciviously (0:38:00).

Arnold plays constantly with the fluidity of the subject/object functions and with the concepts of agency, vulnerability and sovereign subjectivity as applied to her characters in relation to the technologies of gender⁷:

If nothing acts on me against my will or without my advanced knowledge, then there is only sovereignty, the posture of control over the property that I have and that I am, a seemingly sturdy and self-centered form of the thinking “I” that seeks to cloak those fault lines in the self that cannot be overcome. [...] Is this not the masculinist account of sovereignty that, as feminists, we are called onto dismantle? (Butler et al. 2016, 23–24)

This is precisely what Arnold does, dismantling that “masculinist account of sovereignty” and questioning “the received definitions of vulnerability as passive (in need of active protection) and agency as active (based on a disavowal of the human creature as “affected”)” (Butler et al. 2016, 3). Michael Hardt expands this idea when he points out that “every increase of the power to act and think corresponds to an increased power to be affected —the increased autonomy of the subject, in other words, always corresponds to its increased receptivity” (Hardt 2007, x). It is in this context where the concept of relational autonomy gains full force, contrasting as it does with a liberal understanding of the autonomous, sovereign subject.

As Mackenzie puts it (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 42), relational autonomy is “committed to a social ontology of persons”, an idea of the individual as “embodied” in “social practices” and “social group identities” which opposes clearly the “normative individualism” of (neo)liberal discourse. Thus, while it is true Clyde is a candidate to embody the average, sovereign male subject, portrayed as he is, full of vitality, throwing parties and as a hard-drinking, sexually over-active man, his independence and empowerment is put into question: he is unemployed, becomes the object of Jackie’s obsessive gaze, and he will be framed by her with false evidence to put him back in prison. If Arnold can play with the concept of vulnerability it is because, as humans, vulnerability is inherent to our embodied selves but, at the same time, vulnerability is situational specific, “caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 7). In addition to his condition as unemployed and the restraining order from his daughter, Clyde is subjected to those technologies of gender

that make Jackie see him (and us through her eyes) as representative of the toxic masculinity known as “clydesidism”. As Patricia T. Clough states, while “the matter of the body is dynamic, its dynamism is the effect of the productivity of a cultural form imposed on the body. The nature of bodily matter is culturally or unnaturally formed” (Clough 2007, 8): that is, “what the body is thought to be [...] is a matter of a historically specific organization of forces brought into being by capital and discursive investments” (Clough 2007, 16).

The fact that Clyde killed Jackie’s husband and her little child in a car accident while he was on drugs makes him the object of Jackie’s obsessive surveillance, an obsession that leads her to play the masculinist role of the “lone avenger” and put him back into prison with false evidence.⁸ Before going on, I want to make clear that Clyde will not be treated in my analysis as object of pity, nor is he portrayed as the victim in the film (or that, by extension, men are as oppressed by patriarchy as women are). As the Spanish Association of Men for Equality claims, it is fundamental to understand that in no case can we treat men as “victims”, in the sense that “gender constructions are as harmful to us [men] as they are for women. The wrongs that many men suffer in trying to adopt hegemonic gender roles are just one side of the coin of the privileges and advantages we enjoy for accepting those very same roles while, in the case of women, gender constructions situate them in a position of subordination and inequality” (VVAA 2017, 34. My translation). In this sense, Clyde deserves in many ways everything that has happened to him. Nevertheless, despite Arnold’s sympathies are explicitly with the female character and her suffering, she is also critical when Jackie behaves as a sovereign subject.

As it has already been mentioned, Jackie is the focalizer of the narrative, a uniformed officer who watches over the city streets from a CCTV control room, a woman portrayed with full agency and nonetheless, we see her as a vulnerable individual, most of the times in silence, lonely and in a passive attitude, even in her sexual encounter with a married man in his car, in one of the most disturbing sequences in the film (0:06:20): we see Jackie’s face with a blank expression pressed against the car window and her breath fogging the glass, moving rhythmically, until the scene gets us inside the car and we see the man she is with reaching an orgasm and excusing himself for finishing so fast. It is a sequence that comes right at the beginning of the film, giving us a hint about her vulnerability and her affective numbness within her immediate social circle, but also reminding us of Butler’s “notion of ‘melancholic heterosexuality’ [and]

the imposition of the cultural norm, or regulatory ideal, of heterosexuality” (quoted in Clough 2007, 7). It seems as if Jackie tries to lead a “normal” life by having this relationship, although in no way is she satisfied with it. Actually, by the end of the film, when her lover insists on having another encounter, she dismisses him by telling him to “go away and spend some time” with his family.

We will learn eventually that Jackie’s vulnerability comes in part from her guilt feelings due to the traumatic loss of her husband and child. According to the technologies of gender, she has failed at performing what she has been made to believe should be her first and foremost important role in life, that of being a good mother and a good wife. As Pat Brewer points out in relation to the conservative and traditional conceptions of women, “the policies bolster the acceptance that women’s ‘natural’ place is first or foremost in the family as the unpaid carers of husbands, children, the sick and aged and therefore their waged work is only secondary” (Brewer 2004, 8). Jackie’s guilt derives from the unbearable fact that the day her child and husband were killed, she was too tired from work. Her father-in-law (0:09:40) will recriminate her that the last time he saw his son (that is, Jackie’s husband), he was with their little child because Jackie was too tired and needed a break from her family duties, a sentence which will resonate throughout the rest of the film, because it was that day when Clyde ran them over and killed them. Later in the film (0:58:00), we will see her enacting her trauma, sleeping with her daughter and husband’s ashes first and then breathing in a bunch of clothes still with the smell of her daughter (1:35:00). Jackie refuses to celebrate a burial as her family demands: she thus reflects/embodies what Clough described as characteristic of the Lacanian subject who “submits to the law” and, at the same time refuses it: Jackie “is shaped around a lack in being [...] which sends unconscious desire along a chain of signifiers in a blind search to recapture what is lacking. The subject is shaped around a void, a real that is always already lost and only leaves traces of its loss as traumatic effects” (Clough 2007, 5). She feels tortured by those technologies of gender that are not only about representation (as a film narrative is), but also about self-representation. As De Lauretis points out, gender “is constructed by the given technology, but also [...] it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual whom that technology addresses” (1987, 13). In relation to this, I find particularly useful David Staples’ concept of “thermodynamic capitalism”, given that Arnold denounces precisely this controlling “(re)productive labour”:

Ideologically, capitalism needs to make a claim on *future* natural resources and reproductive labor (more and more via biotechnology, waged home-based work, as well as the commodification of affective labor), especially when that labor in particular produces resistance, loss, decay, waste and dissipation within the patriarchal order. Thermodynamic capitalism, in the European and American social factory of the 1960s and 1970s, therefore needed to somehow transform or eliminate those entropic labor forces whose energy could not be put to work—the recalcitrant shift workers, the unhappy housewives, the social deviants, the rebellious colonials and so on. Jackie’s trauma derives precisely from being one of “those entropic labour forces whose energy” cannot be put to work as the capitalist, gendered hegemonic worldview proposes, as they produce “resistance, loss, decay, waste, and dissipation within the patriarchal order” (Staples 2007, 133–134).

However, Andrea Arnold does not victimize Jackie. On the contrary, her position as “sovereign subject”, in the “sense of self-mastery and mastery over the environment” (Bracke 2016, 58), is more than questionable: we see her observing the citizens of Glasgow just as a pastime and directing the camera randomly to a man walking his dog (0:01:30) or watching a cleaner who is dancing to the music in her headphones (0:02:20). While that misuse of the CCTV cameras invading our privacy as individuals may be considered innocent nowadays, we cannot forget the debate about security cameras in public spaces at the time when the film was released in 2006. Accordingly, Arnold’s omnipresent CCTV cameras are the tangible symbol of Sarah Bracke’s “longing for security” and “securitarian politics” as “developed in the global North”, in clear connection with “Butler’s account of vulnerability” (quoted in Bracke 2016, 58). Once again, while the prevailing discourse is that CCTV cameras are used to protect us, they are a permanent reminder that we are citizens under permanent surveillance and that our privacy is more vulnerable now than ever.⁹ Arnold seems particularly worried about this and offers countless shots of Jackie misusing the camera for her own interest and not so much to take care of the citizens she is supposed to protect. There is, in fact, a sequence in which she is following Clyde compulsively with the cameras, while we see on another screen how a girl is being bullied and injured by some other girls (0:29:00). When Jackie realizes, it is already late and she can only send help a posteriori, feeling remorse for her neglect.

If affect is defined as the capacity to affect and be affected (Athanasiou et al. 2008, 6; Ash 2015, 2), Arnold's film seems a treatise on affect and the "outcome of the encounter between entities and how entities are affected by these encounters" (Ash 2015, 2); in the case of Jackie, first through CCTV screens and cameras, and later face to face in her encounter with Clyde. Jackie is the perfect embodiment of an entity shaped by what Ash defines as "inorganically organised affects", that is, affects that emerge from "assemblages of manufactured components that allow an object to perform some kind of task or activity" (Ash 2015, 2). Moreover, according to Clough, "to be human is to be shaped by and immersed in technical affects" (quoted in Ash 2015, 6). Jackie's traumatic experience makes her an isolated individual who relates to the world mostly through the CCTV cameras and screens. What is particularly interesting is the fact that Arnold, with her repeated shots of Jackie watching the monitors and managing the cameras, seems to direct her critical gaze down to her own persona as filmmaker in a self-conscious manner, as the link with Jackie is more than evident: both of them affect and are affected by cameras and screens. As Haraway reminds us, "feminist knowledge is rooted in imaginative connection and hard-won, practical coalition –which is not the same thing as identity, but does demand self-critical situatedness and historical seriousness. Situatedness does not mean parochialism or localism; but it does mean specificity and consequential, if variously mobile, embodiment" (1997, 47).

What is more, Arnold's self-awareness makes her very critical with Jackie's sovereign subjectivity, as if she had in mind Haraway's reminder about our "capacity to see from the peripheries" and the "serious danger of romanticizing [...] the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. [...] The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation" (1991, 191). In this sense, Arnold seems to explore "a vocabulary that breaks with masculinist models of autonomy without essentializing the feminine or idealizing vulnerability as an ultimate value" (Butler et al. 2016, 6–7). Thus, in order to stress the relational nature of the concept, Arnold situates Jackie between the vulnerable and the lone avenger character so intimately related to the myth of the sovereign subject. Only when she is fully aware of her vulnerability, of her capacity for being affected, will she empathize with Clyde who is trying to rebuild his relationship with his daughter and she will withdraw the charges against him that put him back in prison (1:35:00). As Michael Hardt (following Spinoza) states,

there is “a correspondence between the power to act and the power to be affected. This applies equally to the mind and the body: the mind’s power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body’s power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies. The greater our power to be affected, he [Spinoza] posits, the greater our power to act” (Hardt 2007, x).

To conclude, then, let me suggest that Arnold offers a bittersweet kind of ending: in a final meeting between the two main characters (1:37:00), Jackie and Clyde will face each other just to go on with their lives although, in line with Sarah Bracke’s criticism (61–62) of the ever more popular discourse of resilient bodies, there is no way in which Clyde and Jackie may “bounce back” to a previous state before their traumatic experiences, because theirs are “bodies haunted by memories of times lost and places left” (Clough 2007, 4). However, we see how Jackie and Clyde set aside their sovereign subjectivities and acknowledge vulnerability and their dependency on other bodies: while the film leaves open a real possibility of Clyde recovering the relationship with his daughter, we see Jackie visiting her parents in law and reconciling with them, deciding together the location to scatter the ashes of her husband and daughter. By the end of the film, we see both characters resisting the technologies of gender that had shaped their lives so far and how they overcome “the social norms that precede us and that form the constraining context for whatever forms of agency we ourselves take on in time” (Butler et al. 2016, 18). Consequently, Arnold seems to embrace Haraway’s theories and sets her self-conscious, critical gaze on those “visualizing apparatuses of the disciplinary regimes of modern power-knowledge networks [that] can be as deadly as the all-seeing panopticon that surveys the subjects of the biopolitical state” (Haraway 1997, 51) although at the same time the filmmaker shares Haraway’s point of view about how “counting and visualizing are also essential to freedom projects” (1997, 51).

In this way, answering the question at the beginning of this chapter about the “feminine aesthetic”, Arnold uses the apparatus to focus on gendered concepts such as vulnerability as opposed to agency and sovereign subjectivities in order to subvert them: she seems interested not so much in offering easy answers, but in what Lefebvre termed “complexifying”,¹⁰ posing questions and demanding the active participation of the spectators, in line with Boveschen’s “aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception” (quoted in De Lauretis 1987, 127), inviting us to

engage critically with what we have just seen and, “in a reflexive movement, [return] our gaze back” (Halasz 2011, 30). Interestingly, as a final twist, the film ends with a shot of Jackie walking the streets of Glasgow as seen through a CCTV monitor while the final credit titles roll on the screen (1:45:00), leaving it open to our interpretation: maybe she is free from her trauma, but the technologies of gender still affect and frame her as they do the rest of us.

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NOTES

1. In the fashion of, say, *Lara Croft*, *Resident Evil* or Marvel films, where super-heroines seem to offer the male cinematic dream experience par excellence, both in terms of (gendered) film genre and heterosexist, voyeuristic desires.
2. Mediation, as Allan Rowe notes, is “a key concept in film and media theory [that] implies that there are always structures, whether human or technological, between an object and the viewer, involving inevitably a partial and selective view” (90), and it is related in one way or another to Haraway’s “situated knowledges”.
3. Patricia Waugh opposes nineteenth-century realism, with its “firm belief in a commonly experienced, objectively existing world of history”, to modernist fiction and “the initial loss of belief in such a world”. Modernist fiction, in turn, is also different from contemporary “metafictional writing”, basically defined as “an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures [...]: any attempt to represent reality could only produce selective perspective, fictions” (7).
4. And here, I consider necessary to establish a radical difference between postmodernism and transmodernity. The first, still Eurocentric, favours some sort of extreme relativism which both questions and accepts as valid at once and the same time any discursive positioning; a transmodern approach, even when adopting many of the postmodernist postulates, makes a clear distinction between a privileged elite (the white, middle-aged, middle and upper class man) and the long-time oppressed and marginalized groups of (post)Modernity which, because of their race,

- class, gender and/or sexual option, have been silenced and/or excluded from History. See Enrique Dussel or Ramón Grosfoguel for a deep analysis of transmodernity.
5. As it is explained in the production notes of the film, the flats were “soon to be demolished after a chequered history over the past five decades”, although what attracted Arnold was not the flats’ bad reputation, linked to marginality and delinquency, but “the visual possibilities” (13).
 6. See Jaime de Pablos’ chapter in this collection for another approach to the concept of abjection.
 7. According to Teresa De Lauretis, the “*construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender (e.g., cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g., theory) with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and “implant” representations of gender*” (18, *emphasis in the original*): see also Chapter 1, “*The Technology of Gender*” (1–30), in particular, pages 3, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13 or 21.
 8. For a deeper understanding of the figure of the “vigilante”, see Pérez Vides’ chapter in this collection.
 9. Just as an example, take for instance the demonstrations at Hong Kong in 2019 or the use of cameras in drones to control the population during the coronavirus crisis.
 10. According to Henri Lefebvre, “there is a tendency to expel the critique, complexity, and contradictions within modernity” (45–46) and, for that reason, he was more interested in a theory of difference that “implies an increasing complexity of the world and of society. Its opposite, reduction, appears as a theoretical, practical, strategic and ideological instrument of power that seeks to dominate” (27).

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Trans-National Neo-Victorianism, Gender and Vulnerability in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005)

Maria Isabel Romero-Ruiz

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Neo-Victorianism was defined by Marie-Luise Kohlke in 2008 “as term, as genre, as ‘new’ discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between past and present” (1). At that stage, many neo-Victorian cultural and literary productions had seen the light for nearly two decades. The main aim of neo-Victorianism is to rewrite the past filling in the gaps of history and giving voice to the victims of violence and discrimination. At the same time, neo-Victorianism establishes a connection between past and present as a reflection of many issues and concerns that preoccupied the Victorians. However, some years later, she added

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to this definition a trans-national component associated with the fact that Britain in the nineteenth century had one of the biggest empires in history. As a result, neo-Victorian narratives also covered other parts of the world which had been British colonies where stories of atrocities and confrontations between colonisers and the native population happened (Kohlke 2014, 28–29). Thus, postcolonial neo-Victorianism tries to rewrite the history of the Empire but including the voices of Indigenous people trying to give them agency and reparation.

But to provide oppressed populations with restitution, writers and readers, together with critics must reflect upon the issue of historical recollection. As Kate Mitchell argues, the recent role of memory discourse in contemporary critical analysis has provided new ways for examining neo-Victorian fiction as memory texts which encompass “the sheer diversity of modes, motivations and effects of their engagement with the past, particularly to one which moves beyond dismissing affect” (2010a, 2–4). Also, the problematisation of the other that has been brought about by Postmodernism represents a cornerstone in the agenda of neo-Victorian fiction in particular and historical fiction in general, especially when talking about issues of Empire. Thus, I agree with Mitchell in that “[p]ositioning neo-Victorian novels as acts of memory provides a means to critically evaluate their investment in historical recollection as an act in the present” (2010a, 4).

On the other hand, the dynamics of gender and power are also part of the landscape in cultural memory: gender, race and class markers determine the way in which a culture portrays its past through its tropes and codes. In this context, feminist scholarship has recently redefined culture from women’s perspective including their stories, work and artefacts. This new approach is concerned with important aspects such as exile, migration, and immigration connected with the gender politics of decolonisation. Thus, the archive and the transference of memory through spatial and generational frontiers become essential (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 3, 6). In his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) Edward Said claimed that the role of the novel had been essential in the creation of imperial attitudes of the West towards the overseas colonies (70–71), hence it is quite appropriate to use the novel to dismantle colonial ideas and categories of the past.

This is what Grenville herself wants to do in her novel. In an interview with Ramona Koval for Australia’s Radio National in July 2005, she

talked about her novel as being the story of Australia's European settlement from a new point of view. In this interview, she asserted that she had spent about a year and a half doing research before starting to write, and that the history of Australia had many secrets that most Australians preferred to ignore. In particular, she was talking about the relationship between white Australians and Aboriginal people. However, at the same time, she argued that, besides history, fiction can be a different way of looking at the past contributing to the "empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events" (Grenville 2005b). She decided not "to approach the past in a forensic frame of mind" but to "*experience* the past"—as if it were happening here and now" (Grenville 2006, 47; text italics). Also, Grenville's intention when writing this book was to incorporate the missing history of Indigenous Australians into the country's history, putting an end to "the great Australian silence".¹ This silence, as Grenville argued in another interview with Graeme Harper, had impeded acknowledgement of an Aboriginal past of violence at the hands of English settlers. Moreover, in the same interview, she vindicated literature to fill the silent gaps of history (2009, 13).

Grenville based her novel on the life of her ancestor Solomon Wiseman, a story that she heard from her mother, where stereotypes of the exiled convict, the brave pioneer and the myth of the first contact between settlers and Aboriginal people converge. She situates her novel as "an imaginative supplement to the historical record" (Mitchell 2010b, 258), endorsing the Postmodern idea that both history and fiction can contribute to the reconstruction of the past, as they have the same origins as discourses (Mitchell 2010b, 254). Family history transmitted from parents to children in the form of cultural memory becomes fundamental in the re-writing of the past. This past which is fragmented, discontinuous and often traumatic is reconstructed through a counter-history that has been inherited through acts of remembrance, which can be visual, verbal or bodily acts. In this sense, the story of the individual told by oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony or performance represents a challenge to official mainstream history (Hirsch and Smith 2002, 7, 10).

In this context of British settlers and Aboriginal confrontations, I view Eckart Voights-Virchow's use of the concept of cultural and subcultural hermeneutics as a very appropriate tool for the analysis of historical difference and otherness. In his words, "[t]he aim of cultural hermeneutics is to arrive at an understanding as a result of historical processes by analysing historical narratives, both fictional and non-fictional" (Voights-Virchow

2009, 108). This applies to neo-Victorian fiction as novels which are populated by characters that are outside mainstream culture and fall into the category of the other, having their counterparts in our contemporary world. And this certainly can be said of neo-Victorian novels like *The Secret River* which aim to rewrite and reconstruct a colonial past where Aboriginal people can be identified as the other. At the same time, the white coloniser is perceived as the other in the natives' minds, so that these two processes of othering are difficult to reconcile in the narrative.

To this scenario we can add Elizabeth Ho's view of postcolonial theory as a memorial practice. In her opinion, neo-Victorianism can offer a mode to think about history in a different way so that it can be made accountable to the present (Ho 2012, 16). She resorts to Paul Gilroy's notion of "postcolonial melancholia" that she describes as the situation of "a post-imperial Britain unwilling and unable to face the loss of national greatness and prestige" (Ho 2012, 17). She continues to emphasise the importance of memory and trauma culture as central elements in the process of recovery, and for obtaining justice and political and economic reparation for the victims of imperialism in a postcolonial world (Ho 2012, 17).

Thus, the central issue is negotiating colonial identities to redefine "foreignness" and "otherness" not only in a British context, but also in a globalised context that includes aspects such as representation, power, gender, sexuality and subalternity (Khair 2009, 9, 11). The ghost of a colonial past haunts our postcolonial presents, and neo-Victorian fiction gives voice to the "subaltern other" to write back to Empire, contesting new imperialism and spheres of influence. Focusing on the idea of globalisation, the influence of the British Empire goes beyond its borders, with neo-Victorianism becoming part of a global politics; thus, its trans-national aspect questions narrow Western or even Anglophone interpretations embracing a plurality of attitudes, contexts and mindsets which include the former colonies (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015, 1–4). In this sense, Said's travelling theory gains strength in my argument as, according to him, ideas and theories travel from person to person, situation to situation or one period to another. Therefore, it is important to discern if these ideas or theories can become relevant when they travel from one culture to another, and neo-Victorianism is an example of this conceptual framework (1983, 226–227). Behind this idea of contemporary globalisation and the presence of Anglocentrism in economic and cultural power relations lies the possibility of also looking at Britain's

imperial past as a global context where the boundaries between territories blur in the exchange of commodities and people. In this way, the relationship between the empire's periphery and centre is subverted and inverted by contemporary literary representations in neo-Victorian fiction that engage with areas such as Australasia, India and East Asia (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013, 28).

However, as neo-Victorian fiction, the novel also conveys a double meaning in the reflection of Empire and power relations into our contemporary postcolonial western civilisation and into the relationships between developed and emerging countries. Therefore, some issues converge in the analysis of the novel. Firstly, historical difference and otherness come to the fore as neo-Victorian fiction is concerned with cultural hermeneutics and the re-writing of the Victorian past; as a consequence, the British Empire as part of the Victorian culture becomes a trope to be analysed from the prism of postcolonial theory, establishing a relationship with notions of imperialism and new imperialism that are concomitant with contemporary globalisation. Secondly, the encounter between the colonisers and the colonised and the violence and confrontations this encounter brought along can be considered as paradigmatic of the situations of vulnerability and precarity that ensued.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the way in which the early Australian settlement contributed to the creation of an English identity based on the experience of colonisation, which was not the same according to gender differences. This identity has always been associated with civilisation and progress and with white supremacy, but the novel inverts this notion, invoking sympathy for both parties, the colonisers and the colonised, under situations of precarity and vulnerability. Thus, following Judith Butler's theories, I will argue that both sides became involved in a relationship of mutual vulnerability, where gender becomes an identity marker. In what follows next, my discussion will be organised around two main topics: Australian history and narratives of recollection, and gender identity and vulnerability both in white settlers and Indigenous communities.

9.2 HISTORICAL RECOLLECTION, GENDER AND VULNERABILITY IN *THE SECRET RIVER*

Feminism and neo-Victorianism have in common their belief that looking back can help to move forward. Our contemporary sexual politics, the

same as the Victorian one, have been determined by contradictory notions of womanhood, feminism and gender performance. In this sense, current debates about whether feminism and society have made progress or have fallen behind or whether hierarchies have suffered any change become relevant (MacDonald and Goggin 2013, 3–4). Grenville’s feminism is concerned with a view of the world in terms of sex, gender and power, more than an ideology that can help us understand it (Sheridan 2010, 1).

Some of these issues are reflected in the narrative in the relationship between Thornhill and his wife Sal. Water is present in *The Secret River* not only in the voyage as a convict of William Thornhill and his family on board the *Alexander*, a convict ship that transported them from their homeland to His Majesty’s colony of New South Wales in 1806, but also as the medium for their survival through trade with other settlers and convicts. These convicts had found in Australia the place where to prosper and start a new life by claiming ownership of a plot of land, and this is what the Thornhills did. They arrived in Sidney, known at the time as The Camp, but the harsh experience of travelling on board a convict ship had kept Mr. and Mrs. Thornhill separated. Mr. Thornhill caught sight of his second son for the first time, his wife and his first child having been in the darkness of the hold the whole of the journey. Convicts and free people occupied different spaces on board the ship. He had worked for different masters pulling an oar: “It made little difference whether the water on which he did it was called the Thames or Sydney Cove” (Grenville 2005a, 85). After that he could obtain his “ticket of leave” which meant that he could benefit from his own work while still being a prisoner. He could even take a piece of land to call his, but he could not leave the colony until he was given the pardon which came after five years; the Thornhills’ aim was to work and save money to return to England. For instance, the fact that she becomes his master as a convict in Australia calls the reader’s attention. Masters had total power over servants, even over life and death, so Sal, who was a free immigrant, had immense power over her husband legally and morally, thus inverting gender roles. It was not always common that the wives of convicts sentenced to transportation travelled with them and their families. However, Sal shows her determination to travel and be bound together with her husband as it would be considered her moral obligation according to patriarchy. We find here a tension between her public status as a free/mistress and her private one as wife being unfree/subject. Sal is a very strong woman, travelling while pregnant and delivering her child on a ship. She continued to be her

husband's support till old age, although their relationship was estranged by different views on colonial and family matters, as we shall see.

Land and water would determine their future, so Thornhill decided to buy a small boat, *The Hope*, to make a living, “[w]ith such a small boat he would have to work in a small way, but if he owned it himself he would do well enough not to have to thieve. He would make a good steady living, nothing grand, but reliable” (Grenville 2005a, 119). But he also chose a plot of land where to settle with his family as “[a]ll a person need do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith's or Flanagan's, and out-stare anyone who said otherwise” (Grenville 2005a, 125). This piece of land, Thornhill's Point, was close to the Hawkesbury, a river difficult to find which he navigated with the *Hope*.

In the novel, the Hawkesbury River represents a place where narratives of the Australian past remain submerged. It is a trope of movement and incursion of settlers to have access to reaches of land while at the same time they intrude in the lives of the Indigenous population whose lives are disturbed. The river becomes a contradictory example of chance and annihilation. It also becomes a “contact zone” where encounters between different cultures and clashing ideas about property come into conflict (Kossev 2007, 13). According to Mary Louise Pratt, “contact zones” are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (2003, 4). Australian frontiers became “contact zones” in this sense where mutual understanding was nearly impossible as natives and colonisers spoke very different languages, both in a literal and metaphorical way. But “contact zones” also lead us to a double perspective, because the novel tries to give voice to Aboriginal Australians and write their history as one of destruction and dispossession. At the same time, the narrative asks for empathy towards the English settlers who were evicted from their homeland and had to build a new life in a hostile distant territory. To reach a balance between both narratives is a really difficult task to do for Grenville, being herself a descendant of the colonisers. Thus, stories of the first contact on the Hawkesbury are full of violence, division, lack of understanding, suffering and fear (Collins 2010, 169).

After being chartered by Thomas Cook, Australia had become a penal colony where felons condemned to transportation could settle and participate in a kind of free system to alleviate the “excess” of convict population in the metropolis: this continent would come to replace the American

colonies after their loss (Said 1994, xvi). Therefore, Australia became a kind of Purgatory for English felons, giving them the possibility of returning to the metropolis. The problem was that this land was occupied by natives, Aborigines that were identified by white settlers as “savages”:

[...] everyone knew the blacks did not plant things. They wandered about, taking food as it came under their hand. They might grub things out of the dirt if they happened on them, or pick something of a bush as they passed. But, like children, they did not plant today so that they could eat tomorrow. It was why they were called savages. (Grenville 2005a, 146)

The lack of “civilisation” in the native population of colonised territories like Australia was the main reason behind colonisation. Natives were treated as children because of their unfamiliarity with Western customs and rules. The justification of the taking of the land from the Aborigines was based on the British project of creating an Empire while simultaneously bringing progress and Western values to the native population. In fact, “imperialism is a system” where “[l]ife in one subordinate realm of experience is imprinted by the fictions and follies of the dominant realm”, but at the same time “experience in the dominant society comes to depend uncritically on natives and their territories perceived as in need of *la mission civilisatrice*” (Said 1994, xxi; text italics). We learn in the novel about the atrocities committed by the natives against the white settlers, thoroughly publicised by the *Gazette*, the local newspaper: crops being devastated, children being cruelly killed, or women being robbed. This information gives the reader the white perspective, but settlers were the ones who committed atrocities against the Aborigines.

Despite Grenville’s dedicatory to “the Aboriginal people of Australia: past, present and future”, the story is mostly told through Thornhill’s perceptions, which made the novel’s reception by readers and historians controversial. He initially tries to communicate with the natives when they come close to his property but they do not speak the same language, and gestures are not enough to make them understand: “He bent down and with a twig drew marks on the dust: a curving line that was the river, and a tidy square representing his own hundred acres. *This mine now. Thornhill’s place. [...] You got all the rest*, Thornhill said” (Grenville 2005a, 203; text italics). He does not make any further effort to understand his neighbours, who are in fact the dispossessed, and expects them to share his own views on life. Sal’s attitude to the Aborigines is utterly

different. Despite Victorian notions of gender, Thornhill describes her as “a stubborn intelligence as unyielding as a rock” (Grenville 2005a, 70). She becomes accustomed to the natives’ ways and shows empathy towards them, revealing an emotional intelligence that her husband lacks. Her stance can lead to mutual understanding: “But like everything else that was peculiar here, Scabby Bill’s nakedness soon became ordinary. She grew used to him calling at her and would tear a bit off the loaf to give him” (Grenville 2005a, 94). In contrast with his wife, Thornhill finds the Aborigines’ behaviour representative of their lack of “civilisation”; for example, he does not understand how their women can move around almost naked, the same as the men themselves. However, it is only when he feels his life and the lives of his wife and children are threatened that he changes his attitude towards the “savages”, that is, he becomes vulnerable. It is after a time living by the Hawkesbury that he perceives the natives’ presence and how they are gathering in the area around his hut and his plot of land, which he interprets as a menace:

It took them some time to realise that a crowd of blacks was gathering on the point. They came down from the ridges in twos and threes, the men walking in that deliberate way they had, burdened only with a few spears. The women came after, each with a baby on her hip and a long bag hanging from her forehead down her back. Others came in canoes, drifting up or down the river with the tide, the little slips of bark holding a man and a woman, with a child between, and the water by some miracle not coming in over the gunwale. (Grenville 2005a, 247)

Aborigines’ customs and traditions are described in this passage as uncivilised but at the same time the people are defined as dexterous in their crafts and clever in the way they organise themselves as a group, with gender roles similar to those of the English. As stated above, not only the land, but also water, the river, is the fluid medium that becomes the contact zone between the natives and the settlers, that liminal zone of the first encounter.

The fight for the land makes both parties vulnerable as both feel the threat of the other’s power, although “*It is a well-attested fact that the blacks have no word for property*” (Grenville 2005a, 270; text italics). Thornhill and his family feel especially threatened when they can hear the rituals of their native neighbours:

At first it was a sharp clapping, insistent as a heartbeat. [...] Before he could think of reassurance, the singing started: a high strong wailing of a man's voice, and other voice in a kind of drone underneath. It was not a tune, nothing cheerful that you might listen to like Oranges and Lemons, more a kind of chant as you might hear in a church. It was a sound that worked its way under the skin. (Grenville 2005a, 250)

Settlers perceived cultural difference as a threat. Here ideas of vulnerability become very convenient to describe confrontations on both sides, establishing a contrast between native strategies and white ignorance which sometimes make of the colonisers the weaker party. However, it is the native people of Australia that first come under the predicament of Butler's notion of precarity. According to this, the lives and deaths of all the people whose destinies are not a matter of concern because they belong to the category of the subaltern and the other do not deserve public mourning. They cannot be labelled under the category of human as they are under the control of regimes of power (Butler 2006, 19–49). The colonies were regimes of power under the control of white men reproducing those of the metropolis and other parts of Empire in a global unifying manner. This spirit still lies behind current new forms of imperialism. Metropolitan centres have always aspired to have global dominance and have put forward the same number of reasons that can be reduced to a “national interest in running the affairs of lesser peoples”, believing themselves exceptional (Said 1994, xxv–xxvi). This is the reason why Hardt and Negri talk about globalisation in terms of a new empire:

War, suffering, misery, and exploitation increasingly characterise our globalising world. There are so many reasons to seek refuge in a realm “outside,” some place separate from the discipline and control of today's emerging Empire or even some transcendent or transcendental principles and values that can guide our lives and ground our political action. One primary effect of globalisation, however, is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no “outside”. (2009, vii)

The suffering, misery and exploitation of colonialism are replicated in new forms of Empire in our postcolonial world that shares the same principles and values.

The tensions between both groups come to a head when a Proclamation by the Governor is published in the *Gazette* in 1814 hardening the measures against the Aborigines who commit crimes against the white

population. Thornhill and his fellow men decide to fight the natives in order not to lose their land; he realises that the Aborigines are the true owners of the land and that they are also ready to fight. In this horrible confrontation, there is devastation in both parties: “The sun hardened around them. The clearing had a broken look, the bodies lying like so much fallen timber, the dirt trampled and marked with dark stains. And a great shocked silence hanging over everything” (Grenville 2006, 323). This quote tells us about one of the biggest massacres in the history of the relationship between white colonisers and native Australians.

Blackwood’s massacre as described in the narrative marks a turning point in the relationship between Thornhill and Sal. Before the event, all his actions had been driven by the love for his wife and her support, but in the second half of the novel, Thornhill’s behaviour is determined by his love for the land. He does not follow Sal’s wishes to avoid violence, and a great silence, symbolising the silence of the historical record, comes between them, changing their relationship for ever (Collins 2010, 177). He rejects his ethical role as a witness of trauma in connection with this atrocious massacre of Aborigines as he would do in other similar situations of violence, especially when it comes to acknowledging his participation in these kinds of events with his wife Sal (Mitchell 2010b, 261). Nonetheless, the author calls for the contemporary reader’s role to be a witness of massacres, which makes them feel unable to identify with Thornhill’s position. In his words, “[t]he thing about having things unspoken between two people, [...], was that when you had set your foot along that path it was easier to go on than to go back” (Grenville 2006, 160). He is torn between the idea of the “good settler” represented by Tom Blackwood and the “evil one” embodied by Saggity Birtles or Smasher Sullivan, who was a rapist and murderer, occupying a middle ground. However, he is closer to Smasher’s attitude when he gets involved in the massacre out of the fear to lose his land and of the possibility of his family being killed by an Aboriginal attack (Gall 2008, 100). This again provokes contradictory reactions in the reader when trying to have feelings of empathy towards our protagonist.

Australian history is full of events like this, and silence about the massacre is connected with the so-called history wars. These make reference to the fact that Australian historians occupy conflicting positions regarding the account of the early settlements. The arena of contention is focused on the extent to which settler violence against the native population happened and in what ways Indigenous people can be compensated

for their suffering and loss (Radstone 2013, 288). In other words, it is important to establish the degree of accountability of white Australians for these dreadful episodes from the past. In fact, these episodes are known as Australia's River of Blood, since W.E.H. Stanner had used this expression in a lecture in 1968. He alluded to the massacres of the Northern Rivers committed by the white settlers between 1838 and 1870 devastating the Aboriginal population who showed resistance (Herrero 2014, 88). This issue began to be discussed in the public arena in 2005, together with the forced removal of Aboriginal children to be brought up by white families which continued till the 1970s² (Mitchell 2010b, 265, 267). Grenville accuses the white Australians of the lack of sympathy towards the Indigenous population through her protagonist Thornhill. As stated above, this marked his relationship with his wife Sal, who had shown more empathy towards her Aboriginal neighbours. This transforms their relationship in one of silences between them, as she does not share her husband's attitude. Thus, that complicity that they used to have as sweethearts and partners at the beginning of the tale is transformed, but she becomes complicit again when she looks the other way in the face of massacres against the Indigenous population. She keeps this attitude to ensure her security and that of her family, fulfilling the role of protection characteristic of the female gender at the time. She says, "I hope you ain't done nothing, [...] on account of me pushing at you" (Grenville 2005a, 323).

Massacres are concerned with the violence exerted on the most vulnerable populations by those in power, being a despicable practice. The desire for territory and power continues to exist connected with a nationalist and imperialist enterprise. This new colonialism is about the process of replacing old authority by new authority; colonial identity has become dynamic but according to Said "[t]hroughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them', each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident" (1994, xxviii). In other words, the equation continues to be colonisers versus colonised.

Just before Blackwood's massacre, Thornhill's character becomes more aggressive and his love for the land more passionate, opposing the idea of relinquishing the land to the natives during a confrontation with his wife. It is the first and only time that he exerts gender violence against Sal:

Damn your eyes, he shouted. *We ain't going anywhere*. His arm moved up and his hand opened itself out, almost of its own accord, to strike her. She looked at him, as his hand raised, with something like astonishment. He saw that she did not recognise him. Some violent man was pulling at her, shouting at her, the stranger with the heart of her husband. (Grenville 2005a, 303; text italics)

In the face of adversity, Sal shows determination to protect her family and to reconstruct her idea of home as “a refuge from the wilderness beyond” (Kossew 2007, 12) throughout the narrative, in contrast with her husband, who is being trapped by his thirst of territory, becoming a violent settler under the pretence of bringing “civilisation” to “primitive” people under the veil of colonisation.

However, my contention in this chapter is to assert that both Aborigines and settlers in Australia during the colonial regime were examples of vulnerability, that is, mutual vulnerability existed in a scenario where there was danger of extinction in both the colonising and colonised populations. Thornhill shows himself vulnerable when “he felt fear cold on his skin at the picture in his mind of them preparing their spears with a butcher’s glee, how sharp they were, how quick they would kill a white man” (Grenville 2005a, 251). At the same time, the Aborigines are the victims of the violence of Empire as when Thornhill can discern “a black woman, cringing against the wall, panting so he could see the teeth gleaming in her pained mouth, and the sores where the chain had chafed, red jewels against her black skin” (Grenville 2006, 262). This woman is the victim of sadistic colonisers represented by characters like Smasher in the novel. Not only is she the prey of gender and sexual violence but also the target of racial discrimination being enslaved by a cruel white settler. Thornhill does not help her or tell Sal about the violence and abuse this native woman suffers, doing nothing. This becomes another silence between them, echoing “the great Australian silence:” “Imagining the moment of telling Sal about what he had seen [...] filled him with shame. [...] Thinking the thought, saying the words, would make him the same as Smasher [...] He had done nothing to help her. Now the evil of it was part of him” (Grenville 2005a, 264). He knew that Sal would disapprove.

With her retelling of the River of Blood story, Grenville hopes to provoke critical awareness and affect in the Australian white population. Since the 1988 commemorations of the bicentenary of white settlement,

a public debate had been going on about what answer could be given to the devastation that the Aboriginal population had suffered. It was considered necessary to apologise and compensate the natives for the loss of their land and the violence inflicted on them. Eventually, apologies were offered to the Aboriginal people by the Prime Minister in 2008, but not by the Commonwealth Parliament, which was an obstacle for reconciliation. This happened a few years later and after in 1997 the United Nations had declared a genocide the treatment of native children that had been forcibly removed from their families. Grenville prompts the white reader to abjure forgetting and to empathise with the victims of colonial violence, enacting a double temporality between the colonial past and the postcolonial present (Mitchell 2010b, 266–269).

Arriving at an understanding of difference through history is the aim of cultural hermeneutics. Thornhill himself thinks Aborigines are people of a highly sophisticated nature and with fewer prejudices and better ways to enjoy life despite being considered inferior and childish by their white counterparts:

It was true the blacks made no fields or fences and built no houses worth the name, roaming around with no thought for the morrow. It was true that they did not even know enough to cover their nakedness, but sat with bare arses on the dirt like dogs. In all these ways they were nothing but savages.

On the other hand, they did not seem to have to work to come by the little they needed. They spent time every day filling their dishes and catching the creatures that hung from their belts. But afterwards they seemed to have plenty of time left for sitting by their fires talking and laughing and stroking the chubby limbs of their babies. (Grenville 2005a, 237)

Thus, where is civilisation to be found and who counts as human? Thornhill finishes his days being a rich man, but instead of feeling triumphant, he feels unease like the Australian country feels about frontiers still existing between whites and natives. He has a sense of loss and lamentation in old age since possession is not the same as belonging, a sensation that only the Aboriginal people of Australia can rightfully have (Pinto 2010, 182). At the end of the story, white triumph is tainted with guilt and responsibility for the violent past as “Thornhill comes to see something of the history he has participated in, the injustices he has perpetrated” (McCreden 2007, 23). Arriving at a mutual understanding is the desirable outcome of this story of mutual vulnerability and violence

against Australian Indigenous people. In Grenville's words: "Writing *The Secret River* was the opening of a new set of eyes in my head, a new set of ears. Now I could see what was underneath, what was always underneath and always will be: the shape of the land, the place itself, and the spirit of the people who were here" (2006, 221).

9.3 CONCLUSIONS

Grenville wants to contribute to the history of Indigenous Australians by adding aspects and details that are missing in the official record so that white Australians become involved in remembering the past of violence and destruction in which they took part. She wanted to write a fiction about the Aboriginal history of vulnerability that had been silenced coinciding with the 1988 celebrations of two hundred years of white settlement. But besides the official commemoration, a counter celebration took place with a traditional Aboriginal assembly to remember native history and culture as well as Indigenous survival. The idea was to awaken national consciousness and to provoke an ethical response (Mitchell 2010b, 265–266). Australian politicians are still fighting to close the gap between the white and the Indigenous population who represent a 3% of the total population of the country today. The Aboriginal population still suffers high levels of disadvantage, especially in the fields of child mortality, school attendance, literacy and numeracy, employment and life expectancy. Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison considers that the country has "to grapple with the consequences of 2.25 centuries of Indigenous disempowerment" and that this task is a shared responsibility that must take into account "the viewpoint of Indigenous Australians" ("Closing the Gap"). Morrison's implication in the Aboriginal cause is best exemplified in his appointment in 2019 of Ken Wyatt as the country's minister for Indigenous Australians, the first Aboriginal person ever to hold the role.

To conclude, throughout this chapter, I have proved that Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* can be analysed as an example of neo-Victorian fiction where Postcolonial issues converge. Australian natives and white colonisers in the narrative reproduce a story of Empire and people trying to either conquer or keep the land. The novel is an invitation to understand both sides as there are no winners.

The Empire was at one of its most important stages during the nineteenth century, and particularly during Queen Victoria's reign. In this

sense, neo-Victorian fiction can be also understood as memory and re-writing of Empire, which was a central concern for Victorians. However, new forms of Empire through what are known as spheres of influence affect our contemporary international panorama where former colonies are still under the veiled control of old imperial powers. Both English and Aboriginal identities are described and put forward for the reader to explore: the whites as civilised, the natives as “the other”. But Grenville turns the story upside down trying to demonstrate that both the natives living in Australia and the convicts sent there as a punishment for their crimes are worthy of sympathy and affect as they all were victims of a global politics of Empire which persists today. Both identities, that of the colonisers and that of the colonised, are reasserted in a fight to keep the land where the gender perspective is added, as native women are not only the victims of dispossession but also of gender and sexual violence. Both parties become vulnerable living in precarious conditions leading to a state of mutual vulnerability, while simultaneously showing resistance and agency. However, traditional gender traits are reassessed as through Sal we can see women can be strong and have clear notions of what is right or wrong. Also, women natives can be seen in the novel as examples of victims of sexual and racial discrimination at the hands of English colonisers with white women having a complaisant attitude on some occasions. In this sense, this neo-Victorian novel writes back to Empire contesting traditional interpretations of the past, questioning the notion of British identity as an imperial civilising one, and reflecting global interpretations of contemporary forms of imperial power where gender views mark a difference.

In her performance of cultural memory through fiction, Grenville represents and reinterprets the Australian *River of Blood* as an experience of recollection and transmission through gendered paradigms. By presenting national counter-memories, she makes an attempt to produce a national identity that reinscribes forgotten stories and questions common assumptions to provide Aboriginal victims with restitution. In this way, she positions her historical fiction as a memory text, haunting the white Australian identity and establishing connections with the present and the future.

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NOTES

1. The idea of “The Great Australian Silence” was coined by Prof. W.H. Stanner in his Boyer lectures given in 1968 under the title of *After Dreaming*, where he referred to “a secret river of blood in Australian history”. In fact, what he meant was that there is a history of colonial violence that has been silenced and is associated with “a national cult of disremembering” (Kossev 2007, 8).
2. A report entitled *The Stolen Generation* was published in 1980 to bring to light the crime that continued till the 1970s committed against Aboriginal families whose children were removed from their parents and taken to white families (Mitchell 2010b, 265).

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PART III

Gender Vulnerability and Trans*/Post*
Identities



The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema

Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on representations of gender vulnerability and resistance in recent popular science fiction films, as they are embodied by the posthuman character. The issue of the posthuman has proved to be complex and contradictory and has been approached from many different perspectives. The posthuman is an ideology that makes us rethink our taken-for-granted modes but attending to the specificity of the human and its way of being in the world, its body and its relationship to non-human forms of life (Wolfe xxv). In spite of its diversity, and “whether imagined in biological, technological, or cultural terms, [posthumanism] represents a radical difference from the rules of human thought and human embodiment” (Milburn 1).

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The science fiction genre—especially literature—has long speculated on the posthuman condition by offering scenarios and bodies that question the humanist paradigm. In terms of representation on screen, the posthuman has frequently been aligned with the other; a marginal, vulnerable and passive figure that evokes human fears and/or desires. Yet, and as it will be argued in this chapter, there is a trend of contemporary movies in which the posthuman subject offers alternative ways of living/thinking the world, disrupting the understanding of difference on a humanistic self-other logic. This portrayal of vulnerability can be read, then, as a means of resistance that leaves viewers with a grasp of post/in/trans human subjectivities. The vulnerable posthuman on screen—present in recent films like *Never Let Me Go*, *Her*, *Under the Skin*, *Lucy*, *Ex Machina*, or *Ghost in the Shell*, among others—further encourages viewers to question the meaning of gender and/or race in our transnational times. The posthuman subject is understood, therefore, as an alternative way of resisting normative ideas regarding gender and race. In this sense, my approach to vulnerability follows feminist critical posthuman thinking (Braidotti, Ferrando, Vint) and considers the subject as “nomadic”, that is, transversal, relational, affective, embedded and embodied (Braidotti 2013). It also relies on Butler *et al.*'s idea of the active role of vulnerability in practices of resistance to oppressing power structures (2016).

In order to discuss these ideas, I will focus my analysis on two recent popular science fiction movies portraying female characters that embody the concept of what I refer here as the vulnerable posthuman: Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) and Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Significantly enough, the posthuman character is performed in both movies by popular actress Scarlett Johansson, whose normative (yet alien) body serves as a starting point for criticism. The posthuman is constructed as an unnamed and impassive alien who abducts and kills men around Scotland in *Under the Skin*; and as a human-machine hybrid working for the police in an unspecific Asian city who eventually discovers her true identity in *Ghost in the Shell*. In spite of the fact that in these two movies the posthuman (female) characters are depicted as vulnerable beings apparently doomed to privileging and perpetuating the normative idea of the body in terms of gender and race, they still manage to somehow disrupt established configurations of power by offering audiences an unfamiliar experience. Viewers see life through the posthuman perspective thanks to filmic strategies such as identification or sympathy,

enabling us to temporarily refuse normative human ethics and to understand the posthuman subject as it is, with its alien/transhuman body and non-normative actions and desires.

Before I turn to discussing the depiction of the vulnerable posthuman in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell*, my approach to the posthuman subject needs to be clarified, due to the multiplicity of its meaning, as suggested above. The posthuman subject has been considered by critical thinking as a means to eradicate traditional configurations of power, contesting the old binary logic that assumed the subject to be rational, universal and ethical as opposed to the other. In this sense, Rosi Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject is “no longer cast in dualistic frame but aims at displacing the understanding of difference” (2013, 92). In line with critical posthumanism, my concern here relies heavily on the notions of subjectivity and difference. Braidotti takes an affirmative and vitalist Deleuzian approach to difference to argue that we exist in a plenitude of possible “becomings” that are continually changing and transforming. When dealing with the idea of “becoming”, Braidotti contends that “the intensities this engenders create pleasures and affirmative and joyful affects that open the subject up to a multiplicity of possible differences” (2002, 71). Hence, examining subjectivity not as a universal consciousness but as a process is crucial for this (and any) analysis of the posthuman. Thus, I position my analysis of the vulnerable posthuman in recent science fiction films in relation to this liberatory politics proposed by critical thinking, specifically by Braidotti’s ideas, yet being aware of the limitations and contradictions that this character encounters when represented on screen, as I will develop in the next section.

The very notion of posthuman subjectivity has many ethical implications, since it is not simply a state of being but an active and deliberate positioning. The posthuman subject is a process in constant change, it has the desire to be, and for that, the body represents this complex structure of subjectivity. Embodiment, is, then, crucial for understanding the posthuman. Throughout her work, Braidotti also recognises that the figure of the posthuman is ambiguous and that it is stuck in projections of desire or fantasies of domination and disembodiment. Braidotti is cautious when it comes to contemporary developments on science and technology, although she makes a call for a positive posthuman thinking: “these non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated” (2013, 61).

In a similar line of thought, Sherryl Vint argues that some versions of the posthuman repeat a few errors of the previous discourses. Yet, the posthuman in its embodied form can be also used as a liberating force that overcomes the negativity of contemporary practices. New forms of posthuman subjectivities should be the focus of contemporary analyses. These approaches to the posthuman have much to contribute to the ongoing debates over controversial topics such as gene mutation, cloning, transgenderism, hybridity, biological enhancement and many more.

When dealing with the posthuman being as a site of resistance, I rely on Butler's notion of vulnerability, which she uses to theorise how the subject is constituted through social norms and relation to others. In *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay revise the notion of vulnerability and relate it to practices of resistance. They describe possible strategies of bodily resistance that do not deny forms of vulnerability, such as practices of self-defence, hunger strikes, transgressive enactments of solidarity and mourning, etc. In a similar way, the normally precarious position of the cinematic posthuman being leads to meaningful ways of resistance, in the sense that these characters foster an understanding of difference. The feminine posthuman subjectivity developed in some recent narratives of cloning (*The Island*, *Never Let Me Go*), artificial intelligence (*Ex Machina*, *Her*) and transhumanism (*Lucy*, *Ghost in the Shell*), to name a few, disturb normative understandings of gender, race, and humanist ethics and rules, yet within their own vulnerability and alienness.

Thus, and as it will be argued in the next section, the possibility of having a posthuman subjectivity is suggested in some contemporary films, opening a space for reflection and deconstruction of certain humanist values in the search for alternative modes of understanding difference. In this sense, the posthuman subject can be then regarded as a powerful tool for fighting against hegemonic discourses. As Braidotti contends, "the others are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject positions" (2013, 139). It is precisely this idea what I intend to highlight in this chapter, how the alienated/vulnerable female character offers an alternative position that is offered to audiences, who become closer and momentarily share the posthuman experience. This idea coalesces with the notion of subaltern identity developed by Hidalgo-Ciudad's chapter in this same volume, in which he discusses the way certain vulnerable LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters are given voice and agency within the ballroom community they live after they have been deprived of liveable conditions in homo and hetero communities.

10.2 GENDER VULNERABILITY AND POPULAR CINEMA: THE POSTHUMAN CHARACTER

Frequently, science fiction portrays the posthuman as the object of cultural admiration or aberration, offering a dystopian reflection of the biogenetic structure of contemporary capitalism, impeding hence fruitful interactions between the human and the non-human. Indeed, early representations of the cinematic posthuman body—linked to the figure of the mechanical cyborg—were strongly related to politics of fear and domination. This is what has been called “teratogenesis” or “monsterisation” of the posthuman: the monster is regarded as a symptom of human fears and desires, as an embodiment of the other, as a projection of our phantasms, becoming a political-cultural metaphor. Braidotti regards our current state of posthumanisation as “techno-teratological” and encourages us to find a politics of representation that is able to resist this “techno-hysteria” and overcome the humanist fear of a posthuman subjectivity. Many popular science fiction films rely on the triumph of the restoration of humanism after presenting dangerous and devastating posthumanist scenarios. In relation to this issue, Herbrechter notes that in the teratology or the creation of monsters, inhumanity can be used to inscribe and uphold a system of differences and hierarchies, supported by a mystical notion of human nature with its insistence on uniqueness and exceptionalism, a device which sanctions and perpetuates processes of inclusion and exclusion (29). This insistence on the supremacy of human qualities over technological/biological rationality accounts for the humanisation of the other in order to preserve a “safe” or “uncontaminated” world. In films like *AI*, *I, Robot*, or *Minority Report*, anthropocentrism is privileged over a true posthuman subjectivity. Indeed, the paradox of the posthuman has been pointed out by many authors (Clarke 2009), who recognise that science fiction films consciously present these contradictions on the topic of the posthuman (Clarke 2).

However, and at the same time, science fiction films mean a point of departure for our critical understanding of our convulsive times since they encourage us to find new (more positive and inclusive) cartographies for the posthuman. Herbrechter has argued in this sense that “the return of the repressed body under techno-teratological, posthuman conditions has to be a time of vigilance as well as of new possibilities” (105). It is in this more positive line of thought in which I want to focus my attention. As I see it, there is a trend of recent movies that aim at offering an

alternative understanding of difference. Indeed, the vulnerable posthumans in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* develop their own voice and offer new paths to envisage embodiment, in spite of their alienness and marginality. They cannot be considered resilient in the sense that they do not overcome suffering to adjust to humanist standards, but they manage to somehow resist their hostile circumstances and offer a unique posthuman viewpoint. In these films, the narrative does not try to humanise the other but attempts to keep a true posthuman subjectivity, which resonates with Butler's idea of alterity/precarity developed in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016).

10.2.1 *Posthuman Femininity*

The posthuman characters in *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* are both linked to notions of vulnerability and precarity and are performed by Scarlet Johansson, an actress that has become, according to some critics, “a global icon of posthuman femininity” (Massimi 147). Indeed, the so-called ScarJo phenomenon has been read as herald of the cultural anxieties about human materiality in the contemporary world, and her white femininity as a “transuniversal posthuman form” (Jelaca 398), a controversial idea if we take into account that the movie *Ghost in the Shell* is a version of the Japanese anime of the same name, yet starring a white female character (Johansson). Apart from the two films under analysis here, she has performed the posthuman in *The Island* (2005), *Her* (2013) and *Lucy* (2014). In them, the characters she incarnates are ambiguous, “hypermutable” (Brown and Fleming 187), and unnatural if we consider her “not so-called natural feminine behavior” (Vint 2015, 4). Whether a disposable clone, a dangerous extraterrestrial, a disembodied operating system, a drug mule with superpowers or a troubled cyborg, Johansson's characters in these films are precarious, vulnerable and alien. In them, the posthuman is rejected or cannot take lovers, killed for her difference, designed as a dangerous fighting machine or considered a mere commodity. However, their vulnerability is not associated with passivity in the sense that these characters do not seem to be in need of active protection from the “powerful” ones. Instead, they develop agency and autonomy, which is in line with the idea of vulnerability in resistance proposed by Butler *et al.* Moreover, their femininity is never regarded as a given, natural category, but as artificial, dangerous and, ultimately, alien.

The posthuman is embodied, then, by Johansson's normative body in these movies. Thus, instead of a fluid, hybrid and vitalist conception of the body advocated by materialist critical thinkers, in which "the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore can best be described as a bond of mutual dependence" (Braidotti 2002, 223), the movies under analysis rely on the iconic figure of a young white woman in which the bond human-inhuman/ flesh-machine is alienating. In relation to this issue, Francesca Ferrando argues that "when we think of the bodies, the human body is the first signified to come to mind, exposing the human-centric dialectics of the term. Body is a human concept created in a human language" (213). In a similar way, Johansson's body is sexualised, following normative standards of representation for femme fatales or action female cyborgs, found in uncountable popular science fiction movies and series. At this point, and as Ferrando argues, "technology and science are not free from sexist, racist and Eurocentric biases". The body "is ascribed within the frame of speciesism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, classicism, ageism, elitism and ableism, among other -isms" (222-3).

Nevertheless, as suggested above, Johansson manages to evoke alienness and unfamiliarity in these films in which she performs the posthuman. In *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell*, Johansson's character remains alien, in spite of its recognisable gendered traits and white skin, suggesting how the presence of this star can trouble the distinctions between body and machine, person or animal (Loreck 168). This is partly achieved because Johansson's "feminine" body is considered either as an artifice, a mere suit, that the posthuman appropriates intentionally (*Under the Skin*), or as a mere shell whose artificiality the posthuman is conscious of (*Ghost in the Shell*). In reference to Glazer's film, Massimi affirms: "her body, assembled to match the cannons of alluring femininity, reveals itself a mere shell, an anthropomorphic cover that can fool the eye but nothing more" (156). In a similar line of thought, Loreck argues that "Johansson's voluptuous body actually works to terrify because it is not natural" and that her body is but an "opportunistic camouflage; a tool of mimicry and deception" (175). The same idea of artificiality is suggested in *Ghost in the Shell* as Major Mira is presented as a cyborg designed for killing dangerous criminals. Brown and Fleming also recall Johansson's alienness in this film when they affirm that "Johansson/the Major is here to be looked at, while also being incapable of fitting into a patriarchal

society because of the threatening nature of her combat skills, intelligence and her animality/squid-like nature” (189).

Even Johansson’s whiteness has been interpreted as alien and alienating. Some authors (Redmond) talk about an idealised whiteness that combines with her star image: “if brought together, they construct a powerful narrative about privilege and belonging in the world, one that places white identity at the apex of civilized and successful life” (203). Yet, and at the same time, her idealised white star image is simultaneously recognisable and alienating, since, Redmond continues, “this hyperperfect conjunction” renders the white star both unattainably immaculate, and as a consequence, essentially non-reproductive (203). Indeed, Johansson embodies and expresses these inherent reproductive tensions in all her posthuman incarnations (*Under the Skin*, *Ghost in the Shell* or *Her*), “since her whiteness is both accentuated and rendered a dangerous form of progeny” (204). Hence, “through Johansson, idealized female whiteness is alien because it is out of this world, non-or anti-reproductive (...) and because it threatens its own ontological coherency” (217). However, the issue of racial politics remains, I think, rather ambiguous in these films, especially if we take into account that whiteness stands as the norm for the representation of the posthuman. In any case, her skin as a beautiful white woman in both films is only a mask.

The cinematic feminine posthuman is, then, full of contradictions. In “Alien Feminism and Cinema Posthuman Women”, Dijana Jelaca examines the controversies of “female posthuman subjectivities” as depicted in *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*. Her aim is to devise a new social, ethical and discursive scheme as a way to theorise new feminist epistemologies along the lines of what she calls “alien posthumanism”. She uses the term “feminine alien posthuman” to address issues concerning the spectatorship uncertainty when viewing alien or unrecognisable discourses that, nevertheless, foster identification. My analysis of the vulnerable posthuman equally relies on this notion of a cinematic female alien that occupies the centre of spectatorial identification and that offers us instances of valuable (female) posthuman subjectivities. In this sense, both *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* do offer an understanding of the posthuman subject by means of filmic strategies that refuse to humanise the alien. They keep the posthuman’s point of view, resisting this way some humanist assumptions, which can be considered as the first step towards the posthuman predicament postulated by materialist thinkers. Although the old human issues remain, the vulnerable posthuman

manages to break with cinematic and representational conventions and vindicate the existence of an alternative subjectivity.

The next two sections focus on the strategies the films under analysis use in order to project the posthuman experience. Both texts have the posthuman at the focus of spectatorial identification and offer instances of empathy, especially at moments when the alien posthuman is seen as vulnerable. In other words, the films defy structures of power that underlie discrimination of the vulnerable other by promoting empathy, a strategy that encourages spectators' self-reflection and fosters criticism. While in *Under the Skin* the narrative refuses to impose humanist ethics and allows for a true posthuman space, *Ghost in the Shell* follows a more humanist logics in order to precisely denounce certain bodily practices present in neoliberal societies. Albeit in different ways, each film illuminates the idea of the feminine posthuman subjectivity.

10.2.2 *The Alien Body: Under the Skin (2013)*

The posthuman character in *Under the Skin* is an unnamed, lonely extraterrestrial being who, after taking the form of a white young woman, drives a van around Glasgow in search of single, isolated men, that she seduces and takes to a house to be later consumed by a strange force. Johansson's character remains unknowable and uncanny throughout the film, and her true nature is only revealed at the end of the film, when viewers see her as a black alien form as she is aggressively attacked in the forest by a man. Glazer's film is about an alien posthuman subjectivity, and cinematography works to evoke this experience to spectators, who temporally forget about humanist logics and adopt her perspective. Ultimately, the film encourages us to reflect upon certain humanist/sexist/racist elements at work in our globalised societies. In this sense, Johansson's character, in spite of her recognisable (and normative) physical human features, displays a true posthuman subjectivity that resists the rules of our world. Unlike other science fiction texts where the alien is humanised, she remains posthuman throughout the whole film, with her own desires and ethics, allowing spectators to experience empathy through difference.

The posthuman subjectivity is evoked from the opening scenes of the movie, which are hypnotic and puzzling for viewers. We get a long take offering only blackness, with a tiny dot that slowly grows bigger, until it is transformed into kinds of rings that resemble a lunar eclipse seen through

a telescope, followed by a shot showing a big eye occupying the centre of the frame. Spectators do not really know what is happening or what to expect. The same happens with the following scenes in which we see a man on a motorbike taking the body of a young woman lying on the road and putting her in a van, where a naked woman gets into her clothes. Later, this woman takes an insect from her finger, which we see magnified in the next shot. These opening scenes are dark, shot with unconventional camera angles and mostly silent, as only unconnected words and annoying sounds are perceived, as if we were waking up from a deep long sleep. Hence, Glazer's film offers an alienating atmosphere and perspective from its opening sequences.

The posthuman is presented to audiences as an alien in a humanoid body. The narrative favours the understanding of difference by means of different visual strategies that gradually foster our identification with the posthuman. Throughout most of the film, but especially at the beginning, the alien's gaze is that of the camera, allowing viewers to share the posthuman experience. The camera embodies the alien's point of view as she drives her van in search of her male victims. We get recurrent subjective shots oriented towards male pedestrians, which offers us an intriguing look at how the posthuman subject may see our world. This way, the camera/the alien tends to ignore women and focus on men, who are followed and panned, and become objectified. This reversal of conventional ways of looking in film empowers the posthuman, who becomes active in the production of meanings, giving voice to the subaltern, a strategy also used by the series *Pose*, as argued by Hidalgo-Ciudad in this volume. The result is that spectators feel confused and disoriented when watching these scenes, in a similar way as the posthuman character may experience our world. She seems to be learning about a new environment, yet her presence in it is disturbing both for other characters and for audiences. Apart from the camera movement and the use of subjective shots, other elements of the *mise-en-scène* contribute to create this alienating, oppressing effect: we get lots of silent scenes with no dialogue at all, innovative camera angles and unconventional soundtrack. Vint refers to all these techniques that "not only mirror the alien's own difficult interactions with a strange human culture but also prevent the viewers from falling into any normative framework for interpreting her actions" (2015, 3).

Later in the film, we will learn that her skin is a mere artefact, a tool she uses to seduce men. In her hunting mission, she has no expression

in her face, except when she wants to seduce her preys and needs to pass as a woman. Apart from that, she shows no interest in becoming human, only curiosity at times. Moreover, she has no empathy for humans, which is evident in the scene of the beach, when she simply ignores the presence of a baby desperately crying after both his parents have drowned in the sea. The alien shows no sign of emotion, unmoved in a situation that may have moved even the most inhuman of all humans. She shows to be inhuman and lacking any sign of maternal protection towards the vulnerable baby. This is precisely why Johansson's character has been read as terrifying, unnatural and linked to sexual cannibalism. In relation to this issue, Jelaca argues that "the film refuses to anchor our viewing experience in recognizable discourses that we can attach back to humanist ethics" (Jelaca 382). Similarly, Vint argues that "the film is powerful because it both compels the viewer to stay with the alien point of view and refuses to impose normative human ethics upon the action it shows us through her eyes" (2015, 8). The film resists the humanist logic through a posthuman perspective that does not see difference, nor does understand our hierarchies, rules and ethics. The alien's inability to channel difference is evident in a sequence in which she encounters a man with a severe skull deformity. The posthuman does not feel his difference and does not understand why he is socially rejected. However, for some reason, she sets him free. Jelaca interprets this act as an encounter with her own alterity, since they share an alien displacement: "in her encounter with disability, the alien discovers that the definition of 'humanness', and masculinity in particular, is fraught with ableism" (388). As I see it, this action also means that the alien is free to take decisions that may deviate from her original mission, and that she has her own desires.

It is precisely from this moment onwards when the posthuman becomes visibly vulnerable. Unable to understand how our world works, with its ethics and rules, she seems to pay the consequences for not becoming human. In the final scenes in the forest, she gives the impression of feeling the wind, the coldness and the rain; she looks tired, fragile and frightened when the guard is hunting her. It is at this moment when she best suggests the idea of the vulnerable posthuman, and when spectators experience empathy. The female alien's viewpoint is redirected, and she becomes subjected to the male gaze. Roles are reversed and, after having been asked by her future aggressor if she is alone in the forest, her position as a victim seems inevitable. The ending sequences, opposed to the repetitiveness and slow pace of the first half of the movie, are

nightmarish, and, as Loreck affirms, “rather than even more insistently naturalizing the character in femininity and humanity, this climax fully estranges her body as a disposable exterior” (175). She grows vulnerable until she is aggressively destroyed. The final attack is a moving scene, shocking for audiences who at this point feel sympathy for her. This idea has been recalled by Vint, who argues, “gendered and racialized difference is violently destroyed, shocking us into sympathy with our inhuman protagonist” (9). Here the alien does not become like us, and “we have to find ways to engage ethical community across difference rather than create ethical community via its elimination” (Vint 2015, 9).

Johansson’s character remains and dies alien. Precisely because of this negative ending, the film ultimately articulates strategies of denouncing the elimination of difference in the hands of patriarchal systems. The film makes us think about the need to change our system of values, while reminding us how we are still intolerant towards difference. As Vint suggests, the film shows the limitations of an ethics of similarity but does not enable us to move towards an ethics that could accommodate difference (2015, 10). The vulnerable posthuman allows for a positioning which, if not radical, still resists some masculinist models as depicted on screen.

10.2.3 *The Transhuman Body: Ghost in the Shell (2017)*

Sanders’ *Ghost in the Shell* constructs the vulnerable posthuman through Major Mira, a cyber-enhanced character that eventually discovers how her life was stolen in the past to create a perfect soldier capable of ending up with the world’s most dangerous criminals. Mira is tied to alterity and her feminine body presented as artificial at all times. As happened in *Under the Skin*, her posthuman subjectivity is shown to audiences, who experience some glimpses of the trans/posthuman experience, and ultimately empathise with her, in spite of her difference. Mira remains alien throughout the film, and, although she is offered the opportunity of disembodiment, she finally decides to continue being a mere weapon at the service of a technologised neoliberal society. The film cannot, then, avoid engaging in humanist/sexist frameworks, offering a rather negative ending that, nevertheless, enables spectators to reflect upon future societies and the need to find more sustainable options for our bodies and our planet.

Major Mira has a human brain in an artificially enhanced body, which troubles her existence in the world in which she has been forced to live, a pan Asian metropolis. According to Robert Ranish and Stefan Lorenz, one of the suggested methods of life extension in transhumanist thought is mind uploading, which consists of transferring the human mind to a computer, so that the original consciousness and personal identity can be maintained (121–2). This way, the mind should be freed from the fragility of the human body. The movie relies on these premises but, interestingly enough, the mind is uploaded into a humanoid cyber-body, which further talks about the impossibility of totally abandoning human/sexist references in the future societies. Major Mira is considered as a miracle, the first human mind inserted into a cybernetic frame, the first of her kind. But she is also the object of greedy capitalism, the future of Hanka robotics, a corporation funded by the government to fight criminals, a fact that resonates with other movies depicting mechanical cyborgs, like *Robocop*.

Mira's body is manufactured, and she is fully conscious about it. Cinematography reinforces this idea from the opening scenes, in which we see how her brain is inserted into an artificially created body. Indeed, she is presented to audiences as a perfect crime-fighting device, or as a "war machine", in Brown and Fleming's words. Yet, Mira has a beautiful body according to western standards, reinforced by Johansson's fine physicality. In spite of her condition of a weapon, she is modelled after a young white woman: she has a fashionable haircut and uses make-up, perfectly noticeable in the recurrent close-ups showing her face. She is constructed following the pattern of representation of the action female hero on screen, present in movies like *The Matrix*, *Tom Ryder* or *Wonder Woman*, to name some popular examples. Thus, the Major is brave, resourceful and strong, is seen carrying weapons and is depicted as a skilled fighter, as a mechanical cyborg who gets damaged and needs reparation. Her manners are tough, as when she coldly implores the doctor that created her: "maybe next time you can design me better", or to her boss: "I wasn't designed to dance", "I will fight him. I will kill them, it is what I am brought for, isn't it?" (*Ghost in the Shell*, 18:50–28:55). Conscious of her constructed nature, she places herself as opposed to humans, a fact evidenced when she complains about her lack of intimacy: "I guess privacy is just for humans" (*Ghost in the Shell*, 19:00). She is associated to otherness and marginality, and her inhuman condition is even insulted at, as when she is told "it is just a robot", or "you have no heart" (*Ghost in the*

Shell, 13:50). In this sense, the movie relies on familiar filmic conventions and places Major Mira on a disadvantaged position. Spectators adopt a humanist framework and associate otherness with difference and alienness, which are embodied by her transhuman body.

However, what is interesting for the purposes of this analysis is that the Major remains alien throughout the whole movie, and, in spite of that, spectators sympathise with her and get to know her posthuman subjectivity. The narrative does not try, then, to humanise her but, rather, presents us with a vulnerable character that resists in her role of the other. Her transhuman experience as a cyber-enhanced being is offered to spectators, who adopt her perspective by means of recurrent subjective shots, in which we get distorted images, interferences that allow us to see her vision of the world through “glitches”. Mira sees the world as fragmented, and her posthuman subjectivity is shown to us, destabilising this way the binaries human/alien and self/other.

This idea of experiencing her sense of the world goes a step further when Mira (and audiences) learn that she is but a product of experimentation. The moment in which Mira finds out that she is a disposable product at the service of advanced capitalist societies, she feels betrayed, fake and anxious, as even her past is unreal, evident when she complains “nothing I have is real”. It is precisely at these moments when spectators mostly sympathise with her, sharing her vulnerability and articulating ethical debates on the future of science and technologies. In line with Butler *et al.*'s theories, her vulnerability leads to active ways of resistance and from this sequence onwards, we see Mira having agency, not following orders and being the ultimate responsible of her actions and desires. Her body becomes visibly damaged in this search of her past. This illustration of “embodied resistance” (Butler 6) calls the attention, then, to the unjust effect of some neoliberal practices. Thus, the depiction of embodied otherness ultimately offers a space for critical reflection and for the denunciation of the cruelties inflicted upon certain bodies by a greedy capitalism. Mira finds out about her real past and family, how her name was Motoko, a Japanese rebellious girl living in the lawless zone, who used to write manifestos against enhancement until the government arrested her. The bodies of the so-called Project 2571 were but experiments to improve the social wellness of the privileged ones. The consequence was social stigmatisation for these rebellious people living in the lawless zone and resisting human enhancement, who were inevitably positioned as secondary citizens. As Butler contends, the vulnerability to

dispossession, poverty, insecurity and harm that constitutes a precarious position in the world itself leads to resistance (12).

The movie engages with Braidotti's calls for a new vision of the subject that is "worthy of the present", denouncing the commodification of certain bodies by advanced capitalist societies: "these are the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others" (2013, 15). The belief that some humans are more "mortal" than others, which is pivotal in this film, has been forced upon us by the cultural imaginary. Some Japanese bodies are considered disposable in the movie, and the characters of Mira and her friend Kuze regarded as alien, marginal and/or non-human beings. It is important, therefore, to do media critique, or, in Braidotti's words, to "detox" our world from false assumptions. These concerns are also in line with critical perspectives on transhumanism, which examine the main problems derived from this idea of life extension, such as social justice, acceleration of global ecological breakdown, production of conservative subjects, etc. As Pastourmatzi argues, despite its universalising rhetoric and its posture as a global new philosophy, transhumanism (...) "is actually a historically-specific, culture-specific, masculinist, technocentric, American-inspired, capitalist framework with roots in the two-hundred-year-old industrial-military-scientific complex" (272).

As happened with *Under the Skin*, Sanders' film has a rather negative ending in the sense that, although the Major finally chooses to keep her alienness, she decides to do so under the same oppressing conditions, assuming her destiny as a mere weapon. So, after finding out that her "ghost" cannot be controlled and belongs solely to her, she still decides to return and work for the police, instead of claiming an alternative existence. While in *Under the Skin* difference is violently destroyed, in *Ghost in the Shell*, it is commodified by the dominant culture. Both texts ultimately suggest the impossibility of dealing with difference in contemporary societies and remind us of our need to develop empathy and develop new lenses from where to judge the world.

10.3 CONCLUSIONS

As I have attempted to illustrate, the vulnerable posthuman stands as a useful cinematic device from where to articulate critiques to dualistic thinking, encouraging audiences to think of new and more productive

possibilities for our bodies and worlds. *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) present (feminine) posthuman characters as authentic subjects, within their otherness and vulnerability. Their subjectivities are complex, hybrid and processual, escaping most of the time human understanding. Yet, the movies have succeeded in providing the posthuman with a valuable representational space by giving these characters the opportunity to develop their own voices, which audiences share by means of certain filmic strategies such as identification and sympathy. This alternative and unique posthuman point of view enables us to experience difference, and ultimately activate strategies to find more inclusive spaces in our globalised and transnational times. The portrayal of the posthuman leads us, then, to a re-consideration of established hierarchies, as well as to judge the body of the other as a powerful tool for fighting against hegemonic discourses.

The posthuman characters in these filmic texts contest their otherness and, although this resistance inevitably leads to negative endings in both movies, their powerful presence also offers a space for understanding the post/transhuman subject, engaging with issues like gender, class, ethnicity and specism in our societies. The movies ultimately encourage us to find just and sustainable solutions for our problems since, as William Brown contends, “posthumanism must still do political work because humans continue to ignore the ontological nature of our human posthumanism/our posthuman humanity” (18).

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Trans* Vulnerability and Resistance in the Ballroom: The Case of *Pose* (Season 1)

Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad

11.1 INTRODUCTION

“New York City. 1987”. This text, which opens the pilot episode of *Pose*, leads the spectator to a fictional world populated by LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters who are part of the ballroom community and look for success and praise competing in the ball scene. The series focalises the two main elements of the 1980s ballroom culture—houses and ball competitions—through the House of Abundance, dictatorially led by Mother Elektra, and the House of Evangelista, led by Blanca, one of Elektra’s children who, tired of continuously being despised and humiliated by her haughty mother and after being diagnosed as HIV-positive, decides to leave and create her own family as a way to find a purpose in life mothering others in love and care, something neither Elektra nor her biological

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mother was able to offer her. In this new adventure, she is accompanied by Angel, Lil Papi, Damon and Ricky, all of whom will live as her children, and by Pray Tell, master of ceremonies in the competitions and Blanca's close friend, who persistently offers support and advice in all her decisions.

First aired on FX 3 June 2018, *Pose* became almost immediately a worldwide phenomenon thanks to its presence in streaming services such as HBO and Netflix. Created by the prolific team of producers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck, together with Stephen Canals, “[i]t is the first American series where much of the core cast is not only transgender, but played by trans actors” (Seitz 2018, n.p.), making visible an up-to-now silenced community that is given a voice not only in the story but, more importantly, in the telling of that story.¹ Apart from the cast, the community is also present in the board both of scriptwriters (Janet Mock and Our Lady J) and directors (Janet Mock in “Love is the Message”).

This chapter discusses the way ballroom culture is represented in the first season of the series paying especial attention to its two main constituent parts as sites of not only protection and shelter, but also self-assertion and empowerment for a variety of vulnerable subaltern identities who have been deprived of a livable life in both homo and heteronormative communities. It starts with an analysis of the situational vulnerability and the precariousness an important part of the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ populational segment in the U.S. lives in and then offers an insight of the way houses and balls operate as strategies of survival and resistance for gays and trans women who have gone through experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation in society at large and in their own ethnic communities. The ballroom offers them a possibility of expressing their own subjectivities in terms of ethnicity, sex, gender and sexuality and, at the same time, prepares them for resisting the physical and psychological attacks they persistently suffer from heteronormativity. The last part of this chapter focusses on the transitional and interstitial nature of the ballroom, a social space which, in reproducing the neoliberal fantasy of getting success and wealth, simultaneously questions the real nature of such a goal presenting it as just a performative repetition of an unreachable phantasmagorical ideal.

11.2 VULNERABILITY AND PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE BLACK AND LATINX LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Though vulnerability can be understood as an ontological condition (Butler 2004, 2016; Mackenzie et al. 2014), it does not affect all human beings in the same way. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds take into account “situational” sources of vulnerability that are “context-specific” and “may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (2014, 7). Humanity as a whole is ontologically vulnerable, but certain social groups and individuals are much more exposed to particular sources of vulnerability than others due to the precarious condition of their own lives: “there are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others” (Butler 2004, xii).

The Black and Latinx members of the ballroom scene who “come from families, communities, and neighborhoods in which they have had to navigate the often difficult terrain of the streets, which means facing homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse, homelessness and hunger, insufficient education, under- and unemployment, and general sociocultural dispossession” (Bailey 2013, 7) deeply suffer from this situational vulnerability. Their circumstances make them suitable to be considered as part of the “precariat”, a new “*class-in-the-making* [text italics]” (Standing 2011, 7) that, in a globalised neoliberal world, comprises a vast amount of quite heterogeneous people whose only point in common is the systemic obstacles they find when trying to get a certain economic and social stability: “to be precaritated is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (Standing 2011, 16).

The precarious living conditions of this populational segment have important physical and psychological consequences, exacerbated in the case of the trans members of the community who have to face a triple stigmatisation: (a) by society at large for being Black/Latinx; (b) by their own ethnic community for their gender nonconformity and (c) by the gay male community for being women. Bailey writes about the existence of an either explicit or implicit deal in families of colour “that requires one to hide (suppress) or dispense with one’s nonnormative genders or

sexualities in order to remain a full-fledged part of the biofamily and the biohome and to benefit from the shelter, clothing, food, and other resources that family and home are believed to provide” (2013, 86–87) and, he continues, “[f]or Black LGBT youth in particular, noncompliance, more often than not, results in him or her being forced to live in intolerable and unstable housing conditions or utter homelessness” (2013, 87). This is the situation Blanca has to face in the series: She was expelled from home when her mother discovered she was transgender, lived in the streets until rescued by mother Elektra, who introduced her in the ballroom culture, and later, when her mother dies and she decides to attend her funeral, she is violently confronted by her brother Manny who, addressing her as if she were a gay man, reminds her that she is not welcomed in the family: “Nobody wants you here, child molester. I know all about how you fags corrupt kids” (“Mother’s Day” 35:18–35:22). This kind of discrimination and stigmatisation also comes from within the LGBTQ+ community at large as proved by the refusal to admit trans women in general, and trans women of colour in particular, in gay bars²: Blanca meets Lulu, a child from the House of Abundance she wants to recruit for her own house, at a gay bar in Manhattan and when they ask for a drink the bartender clearly states that they are not welcomed there: “We don’t like women in here. This is a gay bar” (“Access” 22:24) and when Blanca asks to talk to the manager, this one just sentences: “The New York City nightlife is segregated” (“Access” 23:33) refusing their admission.

This triple stigmatisation, together with the difficulties they find to get access to a stable job and a regular income due, among other factors, to their poor educational credentials, illustrates the extreme vulnerability and precariousness they go through. Louis F. Graham et al., in their study on the importance of social support for Black transgender women in Detroit, confirm the severe difficulties they find to overcome this vulnerability on an individual level:

The limited data available suggest that access to health care and availability of social support are low, while drug use, homelessness, unemployment, discrimination, prevalence of HIV seropositivity, engagement in sex work, experiences of violence, depression, and suicide are high among transgender individuals and may be even greater among African American transgender individuals. (2014, 101)

Pose acknowledges sociological evidence showing how prostitution and drug dealing are the only sources of income for many members of the community.

But vulnerability requires recognition first to be overcome. Individuals must accept their vulnerable condition and must acknowledge interpellation by an Other who, in turn, recognises that very same condition in him/herself. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's reasoning, it is only in that interaction between a Self and an Other that the Self is constituted as an autonomous and isolated entity. In the Preface to his *Inoperative Community*, he states that:

the mode of existence and appropriation of a "self" (which is not necessarily, nor exclusively, an individual) is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common, and that this exposition exposes the self even in its "in itself," in its "ipseity," and in its own distinctiveness, in its isolation or in its solitude. Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated. (1991, xxxvii)

In his discussion of a contemporary concept of community, Nancy rejects the liberal conception of the subject as autonomous individual and proposes instead a relational subject (being-with or being-in-common) who can only be constituted as such in the very act of sharing with others. Judith Butler seems to agree with this same perspective about the Self in relation to the Other when, discussing the question of mourning, she states:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the "we" except by finding the way in which I am tied to "you," by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (2004, 49)

The human (and non-human) being, as stated by Carrasco-Carrasco in her chapter in this same volume, is necessarily a being-with, a being-in-common and only in that relational axis individuation appears. When that mutual dependency is acknowledged, vulnerable bodies, far from assuming a passive position of victimhood, can start acting as an autonomous and assertive "inoperative community" regardless of age, provide parental (Nancy 1991) that comes into existence in the very exposure of the commonality of its constituent selves.

11.3 BALLROOM CULTURE: A COMMUNAL SPACE FOR PROTECTION AND COMPETITION

Ballroom culture defined as “a community and network of Black and Latina/o women, men, and transgender women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and queer” (Bailey 2011, 367) functions as such an inoperative community. Starting in Harlem in the 1920s,³ the ballroom has always been considered a protective space for Black and Latinx individuals who felt stigmatised both by society at large and by their own ethnic community due to their gender and sexual expression. The two main components of this culture—houses and balls—provide a livable life, understood as a normatively sanctioned life (Butler 2004, xv), for those who feel deprived of it:

Houses function as families whose main purpose is to organize elaborate balls and to provide support for their children to compete in balls as well as to survive in society as marginalized members of their communities of origin. Houses offer their children multiple forms of social support, a network of friends, and a social setting that allows free gender and sexual expression. Ultimately, houses within the ballroom community constitute figurative, and sometimes literal, “homes” for the diverse range of members involved in them. (Arnold and Bailey 2009, 174)

Apart from Blanca, as explained before, Angel and Damon were also expelled from home by their biofamilies when coming out as a trans woman (Angel) and as a gay man (Damon). The three of them come from very traditional Latinx and Black families that do not accept their sexual and gender presentation. Consequently, they have to leave their homes and live in the streets until they find a shelter and new opportunities in the world of the balls and houses. Damon’s story is presented in the first episode: he is a young boy living in Allentown, Pennsylvania who loves dancing, but has to conceal that passion from his father who is laughed at by his co-workers for having a sissy son who is a dancer. When his father finds him dancing in his room and questions him about his manliness, Damon proudly declares that he is a dancer and gay. He is then violently beaten and immediately expelled from home and family, after hearing from his father: “You’re dead to me” (“Pilot” 10:53–14:19). Disowned and kicked out by those who supposedly should have protected them, these characters have to earn their living alone, homeless and without any kind of economic and social support.

This is precisely what the houses fight against when offering protection and encouragement for personal and communal fulfilment: “Houses are led by mothers (Butch Queens, Femme Queens, or Women) and fathers (Butch Queens, Butches, or Men) who, regardless of age, provide parental guidance to numerous Black LGBT people who have been devalued and rejected by their blood families, religious institutions of their childhood, and society at large” (Bailey 2013, 92–93). They function as “alternative families” (Bailey 2011, 367) that try to redress the emotional, economic and social imbalance their members endured after being repudiated by their biofamilies:

House members consider themselves a family and carry out a whole host of activities together to fortify their kin ties, such as taking trips, holding family dinners and reunions, celebrating birthdays, shopping for a ball, bailing each other out of jail, and even fighting with and for one another. Although the ties that bind members together in the Ballroom community are not biological, kin ties are, nonetheless, viewed, undertaken, and experienced as real. Unlike Ballroom members’ blood families, emphasis is placed on the labor involved in developing and maintaining relationships that add meaning to the house. (Bailey 2013, 95–96)

Houses somehow reproduce the structure of biofamilies with a maternal and, at times, a paternal figure who take care of their children and encourage their autonomy and self-esteem both in the competitive world of the ball scene and in society at large; and, in a similar way, ball competitions reproduce the regimes of ethnicity, sex, gender and sexuality sanctioned by heteronormativity. In both cases, the subject has to be able to convey realness to the role they play. It is not enough pretending to be; the performer must really be, so that he/she can be read as what the others expect him/her to be: “to be ‘real’ is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society. In other words, the person must embody the so-called markings of femininity or masculinity” (Bailey 2011, 378). As a consequence, femme queens are the only ones who compete in feminine categories and assume maternal roles and butch queens do the same with masculine categories and paternal roles.⁴

Realness demands a complete adherence to heteronormative sexual and gender norms, and so it could seem that, far from dismantling the gender

binary, ballroom culture, in both houses and balls, insists on perpetuating it. However, realness can also be read as a strategy for survival and resistance, as “the efforts of [the ballroom community’s] members to avoid discrimination, violence and exclusion” (Bailey 2011, 377). In the ballroom, a person both expresses his/her gender and sexual identity and his/her sexual and gender presentation which is the one offered to be read by the others, and these two positionalities do not necessarily coincide. In brief, this community, in its inclusivity, encourages gender bending, the free movement in the interstices of the gender and sexual binary.

The ballroom is consequently a place for protection and reassertion but also a contesting place, a transitional locus that both anchors its members to a reality imposed by heteronormativity and frees them from that same stigmatising reality. The ball scene offers its members’ transmogrified bodies the opportunity of (un)becoming other(s) (Sullivan 2006). Transmogrification, defined as “strange or grotesque transformation: transformation that is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, extravagance, and, as the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, ‘unnatural combinations’” (Sullivan 2006: 553), aims hence at both strangeness and identity since, on the one hand the trans body attempts to become real through transgressive corporeal modifications while, on the other, strongly endeavours to be real in an essentialist way.

Angel and Elektra exemplify this issue in *Pose*. Both identify themselves as women though, at the beginning, none of them have transitioned through gender confirmation surgery. Angel, while exposing her body to her client and later lover, Stan Bowes, tells him: “saving up to have my little friend [her penis] removed” (“Pilot” 38:05). Elektra, on the other hand, eager to become, in her own words, a “complete woman”, asks her man, Dick Ford, for money in order to get her operation, expressing a feeling of shame and disgust for her body similar to Angel’s. Dick, however, wants her the way she is and threatens with abandoning her if she is reassigned (“The Fever” 17:10–19:22). At the end of the season, Angel remains a woman with a penis while Elektra finally goes through surgery, paying the price of loneliness and poverty since Dick abandons her and stops paying her luxurious way of life. These two characters epitomise that idea of (un)becoming other(s) since, even though with different endings, their womanhood’s expression is simultaneously real and strange, embodied and disembodied.

The title sequence of the series, through the slogan: “the category is...live, work, pose”, focalises the interconnection and coexistence of realness and strangeness. The title, *Pose*, suggests a world of fantasy and make believe: a pose for passing, a pose which pretends to be real; but that pose, far from being a fraud, becomes a way of life that requires work, a recurrent performance that creates the illusion of authenticity.⁵ In its performative action, that pose turns real and not just a pretence. In line with the analysis proposed in this volume by Carrasco-Carrasco on posthuman subjectivities in popular Science Fiction cinema, what at first sight can be read as a subaltern parallel world which tries to emulate, in the case of *Pose*, the glamour of the white, wealthy and heterosexual upper class in the United States (the world exemplified by Dick Ford, Stan and Patty Bowes and Matt Bromley, Stan’s supervisor and enemy at Trump Tower) becomes a substitute in its own right, offering itself not as a mirror of that other reality, but as realness itself. What apparently can be considered as a simple subordinate imitation of an outer reality brings to the fore the iterative and performative nature of that same outer reality. For the white heteropatriarchal eye, the racialised ball scene can be a fraud populated by subjects that pretend to be, but, in its own (un)productive emulation, the scene exposes the very unnatural nature of the middle-class way of life of white suburbia.

Stan clearly reverses that mirror-like structure when comparing his fraudulent existence with the authenticity Angel represents:

Stan: I don’t fit in anywhere.

Angel: You thought living on the fringes of society was gonna be some kind of picnic and roses?

Stan: I just thought it would be easier than being a fraud.

Angel: That’s ‘cause you’re a white boy from the suburbs.

Stan: I just wanted a taste of what you have, one moment of being true in my whole goddamn life. But I can’t. (“Pink Slip” 37:34-38:20)

“Live, work, pose” becomes, as a consequence, the motto for both the ballroom and the heteronormative world of predatory Wall Street wolves Stan and his co-workers at Trump Tower belong to.

The ball scene can then be read as a mimicry of white upper class heterosexual society, and in its mimetic reflection it inherently questions and resists that society: both male and female heterosexuality are feigned in and out of the ballroom in the same way as womanhood, ethnicity, social status and social institutions are mere simulacra in a never-ending process of (un)productive repetition. Understood as “a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*, [text italics]” mimicry “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 1984, 126), and it is precisely in that excess and difference where resistance resides.

The ball scene can be supportive, but, as it is the case in society at large, it is also competitive. In this sense, both the alpha male world at Trump Tower and the houses at the ballroom share the same feature: feigning a sense of good-fellowship that hides a profound animosity towards possible competitors, but whereas in the first case the animosity ends up in outbursts for domination and control as it is the case with Stan and Matt’s use of physical violence in order to demonstrate their unquestionable hegemonic manliness (“Love is the Message” 42:50–44:10), the LGBTQ+ community turns protective and sympathetic towards its vulnerable members. Elektra, always displaying an appearance of self-confidence, independence and control that makes her despise the other members of her own house and the whole community, ends up accepting Blanca’s hospitality and help after being repudiated by Dick (“Mother of the Year” 32:15–33:22) in what becomes a clear contrast with the individualistic male dominated world to which Stan, Matt and Dick belong.

Similarly, the heterosexual nuclear family the Bowes exemplify breaks up at the same time when the house of Evangelista proves to be a nurturing and protective family giving shelter to all those individuals who had been kicked out by their biofamilies. As mentioned before, Blanca endeavours to fulfil the role of mother for her children (Damon, Ricki, Lil Papi and Angel) offering them a proper livable life outside the circuits of drug dealing and prostitution. A representative example of this contrast between the biofamily and its alternative model is the Christmas’ dinner in episode 3. Stan and Patty’s dinner, an occasion that supposedly gathers the whole family together in love and harmony, turns out a messy celebration full of jealousy and the conventional quarrelling with the mother-in-law, forcing Stan to break his promise of visiting Angel after dinner for their own intimate celebration. In the house of Evangelista, things turn the other way round. What at the beginning seems to

be a disastrous dinner, after Angel feels betrayed by Stan and Blanca accidentally burns the turkey (the symbol for family and tradition), ends up as a joyful celebration in the Chinese restaurant where the empathy and love felt among all the members of the house overcome any other kind of inconvenience (“Giving and Receiving”). The institution of the family is strengthened and reassured, but this is not the nuclear family claimed by heteronormativity. On the contrary, it is a family of outcasts, of those subjects who are not welcomed in America, the leftovers of the official Christmas’ party. Angel’s trauma with red pumps, originated when her father slapped her for stealing and trying to wear them when she was just a six-year-old little boy, makes her always melancholy and sad at Christmas’ time, but that trauma with the season is now healed when her new mother, Blanca, gives her a pair of them as Christmas’ present (“Giving and Receiving” 55:00–56:15): The wrongs of the heteropatriarchal family are amended by the rights of the (new) trans family.

11.4 THE BALLROOM AS A TRANS* SPACE

Ballroom culture, with its world of balls and houses, can be defined as trans*. When using this term with the asterisk, questions of sex, sexuality and gender come inevitably to mind, but the reference is not limited to these issues. Trans* “is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans* is prepositionally oriented—marking the *with, through, of, in* and *across* to make life possible [text italics]” (Hayward and Weinstein 2015, 196). The asterisk, in the shape of a starfish with multiple arms, points, precisely, at those processes, at a plurality that implies movement and change and, in consequence, an impossibility of fixation and taxonomy, a propulsion towards incompleteness and openness, a perennial utopia (in the sense of no-place) rejoicing in the very notion of the journey, far from any point of departure and far from any point of arrival: “trans* is the expressive provocation, the ontologizing movement itself” (Hayward and Weinstein 2015, 198) and that is precisely what ballroom culture implies: a perpetual movement in and out the underground and the mainstream, a looking glass which allows Black and Latinx trans* people to make real their fantasy of becoming wealthy and successful superstars, at least for a while and for a limited audience—that of the balls—before returning to their much less glamorous existence of discrimination and stigmatisation.

But trans* means also embodiment for the trans subject, though devoid of the rigidity imposed by the gender binary. Blanca, Elektra, Angel and the other sisters in *Pose* are trans* bodies who resist a linear and teleological reading, women who do not fit within the requirements of heteronormativity. Quoting Lilly Wachowski:

To be transgender is something largely understood as existing within the dogmatic terminus of male or female. And to “transition” imparts a sense of immediacy, a before and after from one terminus to another. But the reality, my reality is that I’ve been transitioning and will continue to transition all of my life, through the infinite that exists between male and female as it does in the infinite between the binary of zero and one. We need to elevate the dialogue beyond the simplicity of binary. Binary is a false idol. (qtd. in Bailey et al. 2017, 75)

And it is precisely their resistance to accept a place within this pattern what turns them into failures from a heteronormative perspective. Angel and Elektra are vulnerable characters, extremely dependent on Stan and Dick, as mentioned before: both have an apartment paid by their men, and both try to create a permanent and somehow stable sentimental relation with them, but finally they fail and are abandoned. Due to their economic and emotional dependency, both women are then forced to return to earn their living as prostitutes and consequently get depressed, a depression that will only be overcome thanks to the help of the house of Evangelista and the protective role performed by Blanca, the mother.

Within an obvious fairy-tale atmosphere, princess Angel and queen Elektra long to be rescued and saved by their princes charming who will lead them to the glamorous and wealthy world of white upper class hetero-normality. This fantasy is, however, thwarted, a deception that triggers not the expected negative response of victimisation, but, on the contrary, a positive one of self-assertion and empowerment. The house of Evangelista will function as that transitional space that nurtures its children giving them the opportunities denied by society at large.

The trans* condition, then, is simultaneously one of contingency and permanence, a journey towards something else and a final point of arrival. Vulnerable subjects, ejected from their origins (family, ethnicity and gender) find a new sense of belonging in the act of (un)becoming other(s) in the world of houses and balls. Following J. Halberstam (2011), the

ballroom fits within the queer culture of failure: a culture posited off-track, out of the patriarchal dictum of (re)production. But failure is not necessarily something negative. On the contrary, it can be claimed as an out-of-place starting point, a vindication of difference and deferment, a perennial transitional space which enables the vulnerable subject to resist. Read this way, failure allows trans* subjects to be reassured in their nonconforming identity.

11.5 CONCLUSIONS

The ball scene in *Pose* is depicted, in the end, as a symbol of family and home for the homeless, an alternative Garden of Eden where all its members live happily in good-fellowship expressing trust, loyalty, care and love for each other. At the end of the season, Blanca, the Cinderella-like character, who renounces sex to care for her children, is crowned “Mother of the Year” in the ball competitions, a closing moment that highlights the idea of success for both her and her house thanks to the communal effort of this new queer extended family. The trans* body, in summary, is constructed as a neat expression of personal and collaborative success, making real the fantasy all these characters pursue along the 8 episodes of the season.

Such a finale offers a very soft vision of ballroom culture, a vision that reinforces, to a certain extent, the validity of the American dream for the dispossessed.⁶ In this sense, *Pose* is not as ground-breaking as described in enthusiastic reviews.⁷ Unlike *Paris is Burning* (1990), a darker documentary film on the ball scene of the 1980s directed by Jennie Livingston, which served as inspiration to Stephen Canals when devising *Pose*, the TV series seems to glorify the rewards which effort, self-sacrifice, hard work and persistence procure and thus sanctions trans experiences as in-different from heteronormativity.

Nevertheless, the fact that, as said at the beginning of this chapter, it casts a large number of gay actors and trans actresses of colour and tells the story from the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ community’s perspective, makes *Pose* a risky bet in the world of transnational and globalised streaming services. Offering such a positive view of the ball scene, *Pose* brings racialised trans* America to the fore and, under the taffeta cover of a fairy-tale storytelling, it shows vulnerable subaltern subjectivities who resist stigmatisation and marginalisation thanks to the social support

provided by the inoperative community the houses and ball competitions constitute, while, at the same time, it confronts the spectator with the contradictions inherent to transsexuality and transgenderism and the complexity implicit in questions of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality.

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NOTES

1. This is, in fact, the strongest criticism former attempts at representing this Black and Latinx underground culture received from Afro-American critics. bell hooks considers that Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, the documentary film *Pose* is based on, uses the personal testimonies of people of colour just as a way to provide a spectacular vision of ballroom culture and criticises that sort of appropriation:

At no point in Livingston’s film are the men asked to speak about their connections to a world of family and community beyond the drag ball. The cinematic narrative makes the ball the center of their lives. And yet who determines this? Is this the way the black men view their reality or is this the reality Livingston constructs? Certainly the degree to which black men in this gay subculture are portrayed as cut off from a “real” world heightens the emphasis on fantasy, and indeed gives *Paris is Burning* its tragic edge. That tragedy is made explicit when we are told that the fair-skinned Venus has been murdered, and yet there is no mourning of him/her in the film, no intense focus on the sadness of this murder. Having served the purpose of “spectacle” the film abandons him/her. The audience does not see Venus after the murder. There are no scenes of grief. To put it crassly, her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining. (1992, 154–155)

Pose redresses that wrong, giving voice to members of the community as actors and actresses, scriptwriters, producers and directors.

2. Marlon M. Bailey writes about this racial segregation: “Black LGBT people, who live among Black communities, are largely excluded from or oppressed

within these Black geographies, particularly their Black homes and families of origin. At the same time, white gay communities and the spaces they create and inhabit are unwelcoming at best and outright hostile at worst to Black LGBT people” (2014, 494).

3. No precise date has been found. Michael Cunningham (1995) states that houses grew out of the underground drag balls which started in New York City in the 1930s. Tim Lawrence (2011) traces drag balls and voguing back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Marlon M. Bailey, on the other hand, considers that: “it was during the 1920s that a Black LGBT subculture began to take form. This history coincides with my interlocutors’ assertions that Harlem is the birthplace of Ballroom culture” (2013, 89).
4. Marlon M. Bailey establishes the following gender system in ballroom culture:

Three Sexes.

1. Female (a person born with female sex characteristics).
2. Male (a person born with male sex characteristics).
3. Intersex (a person born with both male and female or indeterminate genitalia).

Six-Part Gender System:

1. **Butch Queens** (biologically born males who identify as gay or bisexual men; they are and can be masculine, hypermasculine or feminine).
2. **Femme Queens** (transgender women or male-to-female (MTF) at various stages of gender reassignment; i.e. hormonal or surgical processes).
3. **Butch Queens up in Drag** (gay men who perform in drag but do not take hormones and do not live as women).
4. **Butches** (transgender men or female-to-male (FTM) at various stages of gender reassignment, masculine lesbians or a female appearing as male regardless of sexual orientation).
5. **Women** (biologically born females who are gay, straight-identified or queer).
6. **Men** (biologically born males who live as men and are straight-identified or not gay-identified).

House Parents:

1. **Mothers:** Butch Queens, Femme Queens and Women.
2. **Fathers:** Butch Queens, Butches and Men (2014, 492).

5. Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Jasper J. Verlinden read this motto in a different way: “the series reflects on the history of trans

representation as much as on the current conditions of Black and Latinx trans survival (Live!), resilience (Work!), and community (Pose!) in the context of violence and increasing visibility, which, in the TV series, is represented by the popularity of voguing” (2020, 2).

6. The perpetuation of such a dream seems to be a recurrent motif in many transnormative narratives, a perpetuation criticised as somehow reactionary by trans scholars who see in such a device a new attempt by neoliberal heteronormativity to impose its own criteria on the lives and experiences of nonconforming trans individuals who do not identify themselves with this assimilationist project. Cael M. Keegan, when analysing *Transamerica* and “My Body is a Cage” from the series *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, states such a preoccupation:

The liberated trans subject supplies the affective matrix for a new form of ideal citizenship that the audience moves to achieve through sympathetic absorption of trans difference. Through the salvational transnormative subject, the democratic project is redeemed and therefore saved. The display of the transgender “journey” out of dysphoria and into authenticity and acceptance now also becomes a quintessentially American journey, forward into the nation’s expanding democratic future. (2013, n.p.)

7. Janet Mock, interviewed by E. Alex Jung for *Vulture* considers that: “*we did something revolutionary and strange and different and never seen before. It exists now, and no one can take it away (text italics)*” (2018), and Alex Rayner wrote enthusiastically about the series in *The Guardian* (August 25, 2018).

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A Trans Journey Towards Resistance: Vulnerability and Resilience in the Dystopian Narrative of Manjula Padmanabhan

Antonia Navarro-Tejero

12.1 INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALISING PADMANABHAN'S DYSTOPIAN SAGA

Many women writers on science fiction and fantasy have been using the utopian genre for decades as a framework to write about gender identity and its constraints. As early as in 1905, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote “Sultana’s Dream”, which deals with a gender-reversed India where men are kept in purdah. Published in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, the story is a science fiction approach to women’s social issues where the author reverses gender roles and is ironic about the different approaches towards social development and scientific advancement. We could argue that the purpose of feminist activism and utopian envisioning is to subvert

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the existing social dominance hierarchy, as it has been stated in numerous studies (Wagner-Lawlor 2013; Sargisson 1996, 2000, 2012; McKenna 2001).

A century after Hossain's feminist utopia, South Asian acclaimed writer Manjula Padmanabhan published the dystopian novel *Escape* (2008) and its sequel *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015). Manjula Padmanabhan, a prolific author born in Delhi, currently divides her time between India and the USA. She is a journalist, an acclaimed playwright and comic strip artist (creator of the popular cartoon character Suki), the author of many children's books, including *Mouse Attack*, and the illustrator of many others. Padmanabhan obtained international recognition as a playwright after receiving the Greek Onassis award for her fifth play, "Harvest", the futurist story about the selling of body parts and exploitation between developed and developing countries, which was made into an award-winning film entitled *Deham* by Govind Nihalani. All her plays and performing pieces have been collected recently in 2020 in two volumes. The first, *Blood and Laughter*, entirely focuses on science fiction and social commitment issues, while the second, *Laughter and Blood*, brings together all her short performance pieces. Similarly, Padmanabhan's collections of short stories—*Hot Death, Cold Soup: Twelve Short Stories* (1996), *Kleptomania* (2004) and *Three Virgins and Other Stories* (2013)—explore science fiction and extra-terrestrial unfolding as dystopian dramas, among other different social, political and cultural conflicts that unfortunately continue to be urgent. She has also published a semi-autobiographical novel as a young woman illustrator, where she observes alternate sexuality in urban Delhi.

There is no doubt that speculative and science fictions have recently taken the dystopian turn and are becoming popular all over the world. In Padmanabhan's dystopian saga, the world's nations do not exist anymore and there is only one global government, the Whole World Union (WWU), which splits the planet into four entirely separate enclaves, where no trade, communication or travel arrangements are allowed due to the collapse of the oil industry. The world is dominated by a central enclave called The Zone, "a giant arena for a continuous savage and immensely popular cycle of war games" (Padmanabhan 2015b, line182), which take place for the convenience of global economy. The Zone is where Africa used to be, and is now divided into countless subdivisions, colour-coded for the different teams that occupy the territory: "The teams live and die based on the illusion of the Three Freedoms: Entertainment, Warfare,

Commerce - the holy trinity. What the teams earn for their owners, the owners pump back into the teams. The approval ratings from viewers, (...) even the quality of food supplements to Champions, have all become part of the Zone's essential ecology" (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 4947).

The novels are set mainly in two radically opposed areas and follow the journey from one side to the other, crossing the Zone: from the Forbidden Country (ruled by misogynist Generals who call their land Brotherland and politically isolated by the WWU as a result) to the Island (a secret land to the Forbidden Country, governed by cis women, the Mentors, with funds from the WWU to run it independently after the women who designed the Zone threw off the yoke of the WWU when the Suspended City in the Zone became an economic powerhouse). In the Forbidden Country, women have been exterminated and men can self-clone. In the Island, women lead a programme to rescue vulnerable women and "restore" them. The first novel, *Escape*, tells the story of Meiji, the only female survivor in the Forbidden Land. This young girl has been secretly raised on an Estate managed by her three uncles, called Eldest, Middle and Youngest. She comes to know that her own mother had publicly immolated herself (a sacrifice with clear sati resonances) in order that the Generals might think that there were no female survivors in their family, thus saving Meiji's life. As Meiji grows into puberty, the three Uncles decide that she needs to be escorted outside the Forbidden Country so that she is not eventually discovered by the Estate General on one of his frequent visits. Youngest is appointed to accompany her and keep her safe during a long, extremely dangerous journey across a wasteland and the Zone, to finally reach the Island, a place of scientific experimentation and relative safety for the mutilated trans and cis women of the world.

Dystopia, as opposed to utopia, refers to an undesirable condition, a worst-case scenario to moralistic observers. This general idea has been examined in some depth by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash in their introduction to *Utopia, Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, where they state that there is a "dialectic between the two imaginaries, the dream and the nightmare" (2010, 2), as for them, "every utopia always comes with its implied dystopia—whether the dystopia of the status quo, which the utopia is engineered to address, or a dystopia found in the way this specific utopia corrupts itself in practice" (2010, 2). Therefore, they argue that a dystopia is "a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society" (2010, 1).

In addition, in our interview with South Asian writers Manjula Padmanabhan and Prayaag Akbar, Akbar claimed that “one person’s dystopia can be another person’s utopia” (Navarro-Tejero and Diego-Sánchez 2020). Following this line of thought, one could state, with Gregory Claeys, that in the long run these two terms become structurally inseparable (2013, 20). This can be clearly perceived in Padmanabhan’s saga, in which the Generals’ utopian world order has become a nightmare for the vulnerable. At the same time, the Island (Padmanabhan’s own Laputa) works as a resistance ghetto to “save and restore” the vulnerable, but it has its own power hierarchies and codes trying to impose their own idea of what it means to be a woman.

In this chapter, I contend that Padmanabhan’s narrative explores the dystopian trope in two complementary ways. First of all, I argue that her fiction is shaped by the author’s specific cultural and national features, and so the first section of this essay deals with the way Padmanabhan’s fiction closely engages with current social and cultural debates in her country. Secondly, I turn to discuss the fundamental underlying question in this saga of where femicide stems from: would gendering and gender discrimination be primarily based on sexual organs, on appearance or on the perceived alignment with masculinity or femininity? Trans identities are visible in Indian society, and although recognised by law, they do not enjoy basic human rights. The same would seem to apply for women, as even though sex-selective abortion, dowry, sati and child marriage and exploitation are forbidden by law, statistics prove female infanticide is a fact. If we accept that dystopian narratives reflect the fears and anxieties of the cultural context from which they emerge, then Padmanabhan’s dystopian fiction appears to be channelling South Asian women’s anger about the (trans)misogyny of the present, and their concern about an inevitable dark future where reproduction is instrumentalised and technology has displaced nature and humanity.

For this analysis, I draw from Judith Butler (2004, 2009), for whom human life is conditioned by vulnerability by virtue of our embodiment, but as Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds argue, also by our condition as social and effective beings, since we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to neglect, abuse, ostracism or humiliation. Moreover, as sociopolitical beings, “we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses. And we are vulnerable to the natural environment and to the impact on the

environment of our own, individual and collective, actions and technologies” (Mackenzie et al. 2014, 1). On the basis of this complete definition of vulnerability, we can argue that Padmanabhan’s dystopian novels move beyond the basic concern of the oppression and exploitation of cis and trans women from a paternalistic and coercive perspective once identified as a vulnerable group, to a universal hypothesis of the interaction between the individual (the increased vulnerability experienced by some social groups: trans and cis women) and the nation-state as consequence of the era of technological perfection and corporate capitalist globalisation, as argued by Guy Standing’s thought on precarity (2011) and by Judith Butler in “Rethinking Vulnerability” (2016). Thus, this chapter explores how concepts of womanhood intersect with those of vulnerability and resistance in Manjula Padmanabhan’s dystopian novels. Furthermore, it addresses how Padmanabhan brings out the gendered resistance to the neo-colonial dimensions of techno culture in the context of female genocide in India, by examining sexual violence under the analytical lens of resilience, a condition that enables the victims’ healing and empowerment.

12.2 WOMEN AS THE ENDANGERED SEX AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF NATURE BY TECHNOLOGY

Padmanabham’s novels present a future that is a twisted, horrifying projection of contemporary politics and ecological disaster. Rupali Palodkar has perceptively summed up the ecofeminist concern in India, indicating that, the ownership of women’s body and sexuality and that of land and nature has rested with men since ancient times: “It is in India that sex-selective abortions are practiced on a wide-scale... There is a need to find an alternative to men’s exploitation of the earth... and to discover an ecologically sound way of life that would not threaten the existence either of the earth or of women” (2011, 60–61). For her, this is the reason why women writers like Manjula Padmanabhan are turning to ecofeminist thinking and writing about the consequences of the degradation of nature and women. In the saga, the world as the readers know it now is referred to as the “Time Before”, which was lost in a detonation. The ecosystem was ravaged by pollution, as the seas shores died, the ice melted and wildlife perished. In both novels, identity politics intertwine with how fundamentalists in the Forbidden Country conceive a world without women, as men have developed technology to self-clone,

and how a predatory global capitalism uses women as commodities to be exploited and consumed. Life in the Zone is extremely arduous for women, as they are shamefully used “as booty, as trophies, as entertainment” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 4938). The widespread popularity of spectacle is to be understood as part of the mode of production and consumption in an age where human beings have to live under close surveillance by means of different mechanical devices, particularly drones. The dominant group in the Zone uses technology to subjugate lesser privileged classes, those powerless (like women) in their vulnerable and precarious condition as subalterns. For Sarah Bracke, subaltern resilience provides the infrastructure for global processes of economic production and consumption, and a resilient subject is one who can absorb the impact of austerity measures and continue to be productive (60). An example is the statement of a character who was born in a sex-circus family and is forced to perform sex for the teams: “[w]hen I is one year old, she [my mother] is give me to her Big Man to use and he is use me three ways, then he is pass me around to his friends. (...) My mother is feed me the drugs instead of milk (...) I is give suck to dogs. To pigs. On stage. To make laugh to Zone teams. Then we is get food for whole family” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 3924).

To better understand the novels, one needs to remember that India is a country with a declining sex ratio, mainly as a result of the strong social bias against the girl child and the misuse of the widely available (though forbidden by law) technology of sex determination for female foeticide. By raising uncomfortable questions about pervasive (trans)sexual violence, misogyny and the erosion of civil rights in her dystopian fiction, Padmanabhan warns the readers about the radical consequences of institutionalised sexism and fascism and challenges prevailing notions of male superiority and female genocide. In fact, according to Surya Monro, if “strategies focused on erasing gender are pursued, the minority gender groups, such as Hijras, Kothis, intersex people and androgynes are likely to be disadvantaged because the default dominance of men and non-transgender people will remain unchallenged. In addition, degendering, if pursued in a prescriptive manner, would deny people the choice to identify in a sexed and gendered way” (2010, 246).

The Estate General is represented in the novels as a sadist who views himself as a sculptor who has re-shaped reality and his attitude towards both the now-extinct cis women and trans women is symptomatic of the death of difference in the land he despotically rules. As one of several

cloned Generals, he believes that difference and individuality are wrong, and sees only the virtue of entire conformity and sameness. Extracts from a series of interviews held by a foreign journalist are inserted at regular intervals in the first novel, part of a strategy to send his message outside the Forbidden Country. Among his many claims stands out one that “The existing deficit of females in our world enormously aided our task” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3582). It is important to note here the declining child sex ratio in India according to The National Institution for Transforming India (900 in 2013–2015 and 906 in 2009–2011), which evidences a real deficit of females in a country where the girl child is often not allowed to be born. Even after birth, so many girls suffer neglect and discrimination that brides sometimes have to be “imported” from poorer regions of the country, and women are harassed or murdered for dowry. Indeed, Rita Patel (1996) stated that the cause of female foeticide in India, which has dramatically increased since the 1970s due to the technology of prenatal sex determination methods, alongside an abnormally high infant girl mortality rate, is the illegal dowry system and the cultural basis of son preference. This genocide has generated a vast literature exploring its root causes (Bhatnagar et al. 2005; George 2006; Kishwar 1995; Menon 1995; Moazam 2004; Patel 2007; Purewal 2010; Sen 2003).

Women in the dystopian land depicted in the novels are called the Vermin Tribe. As stated in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “vermin” is used for wild mammals and birds which are harmful to crops, farm animals or game or which carry disease and parasitic worms or insects but also for very unpleasant or destructive people (2011, 1607). In one of the many manuals written by the Generals to guide the citizens of the Forbidden Zone, one can read that “the drones [servant clones performing the lowest tasks] are what the Vermin Tribe should have been: servile, dumb and deaf” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3131). And later, the General explains in one of the interviews with an appalled reporter from the outside world that “Females are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights”, and that “[i]n order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate females” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3582). Randal Rauser explains that the dehumanising descriptor “vermin” has a horrifying history in our modern age, as in the twentieth century “génocidaires have often referred to the out-groups they sought to annihilate as vermin, most infamously in the case of Nazi and anti-Semitic propaganda” (2015, 19). Rauser

continues explaining that “this practice of dehumanising out-groups by labelling them as creatures, vermin, or some other form of pestilence has been a common feature of genocides throughout history” (2015, 19). It is, therefore, extremely significant that the author has adopted the vermin metaphor that the Nazis used in the treatment of the Jews as inhuman and parasitic to be feared, hated and annihilated.

As the General states, women have been totally exterminated and the species of women is supposedly now extinct in the Forbidden Country. Even words or pictures or symbols relating to women are banned by the laws. The propaganda spread by the Estate General praises the superiority of clone technology as opposed to female reproduction, since their bodies are allegedly polluted. In his manual *The Generals: A Plural Life*, the General states that “we took the Mother out of Nature” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 4021) and citizens cannot even remember now when women existed: “It’s hard to believe what we are told about the Time Before” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3351). The concern with reproduction is a commonplace in dystopian science fiction, which leads, once cloning is possible, to a battle of the sexes and the extermination of one, assuming of course that there are only two sexes, even though there are millions of non-binary people in India. The General’s views on women are imposed on the masses leaving them with a distorted concept of a woman, which is evident in the remarks of Pigeon: “What’s the need for a specialised breed just to give birth to men, any more than there’s a need for specialised limbs for climbing trees or chopping woods?” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3368). Further, Blackson remarks: “I was told a different tale altogether. When I grew up, it was said that once upon a time there was a race distinct from Man and that race was known as ‘Wi-Men’. The sole purpose of the Wi-Men was to bear children. They were small and dim witted, incapable of caring for their needs outside their home and obliged to seek the constant protection and supervision of men” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3378).

We might initially interpret the novels as Meiji’s bildungsroman describing her growth into cis womanhood and Youngest’s valiant effort to save his young ward. But Padmanabhan problematises these characters, questioning the rigid gender binaries. On the one hand, Meiji is the only female survivor in the Forbidden Zone, but she has grown up as a man, dressed as a boy, and under the supervision of men only. Moreover, she has been kept in the dark about her own difference, and male hormones have arrested her development so that she was not killed if her female

genitalia were discovered. On the other hand, the male protagonist, Youngest, who tries to save her, undergoes under coercion a vaginoplasty for the General's pleasure. As a result, both protagonists need to negotiate their own gender identity as their bodies are transformed during their quests towards liberation from the Forbidden Country to the Island.

Manjula Padmanabhan seems to be committed through this saga to disrupting hetero-patriarchy and the biological prescriptions of womanhood. Readers are warned about the political implications of femicide allied with technology and the violence and marginalisation against transsexuals, two of the most important issues concerning contemporary India, which indicate the performative condition and fluidity of gendered and sexual identities in the current global society. To this purpose, it is highly significant that the novels portray main characters within both trans feminine and trans masculine spectrums, as I will describe next.

12.3 TRANSMASCULINITY AND TRANSFEMININITY: STORIES OF RESISTANCE

There is enough evidence within the narrative to posit that Meiji could be read as a trans man. For example, the scene where Meiji is horrified by the growth of her breasts and attempts to self-administer a mastectomy is an event that draws on the dysphoric experiences of many transmasculine people and on the “wrong body” narrative (Bettcher 2014; Stryker and Sullivan 2009; Stone 1992). To hide her during her perilous travel, Meiji is given a synthetic penis, a devise which “perfectly matched her skin and the method of its attachment to her pelvic region was so expertly achieved that it looked entirely at home on her body” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1960–1961), and it brings her comfort. Meiji feels comfortable in a boy's body. This is how she grew up, always dressed as a boy, considered by the rest as an effeminate boy. At the age of sixteen, Meiji is told by her uncles that “you are not what you are supposed to be (...). We want to help you understand what you need to know in order to become what you must become” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 1156), and now that she is escaping from the Forbidden Country, she is under the disguise of a young boy to be shielded from vigilant eyes.

The author is concerned about the weight outward appearance carries in society, suggesting that gender rests fundamentally on how one is perceived and recognised by others. When Meiji is eventually taken to the Island, the land run by cis women to protect and preserve other

women, she is interpreted as a woman unaware of her “true” gender identity. In *The Island*, there is not the slightest possibility of her being identified as non-binary, even as she declares to the rest of the rescued women (known as the Candidates) that “I am not the same as you. All of you” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2354). The people in the Island are anxious about her positioning as either a man or a woman and cannot think beyond the binary. Meiji complains to them: “You called me a ... a ... woman [...] I’m not a *woman*” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2387). But at the same time, Meiji claims that she is not a man when her peer Messina teases her: “Oh! It’s that funny little sausage dangling between her legs! She thinks she’s a man!” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2387). Notably, Meiji continues to resist the authoritarian control of the island women by refusing to conform to either gender. According to Butler, in such practices of non-violent resistance, there is agency that mobilises “vulnerability for the purpose of asserting existence” (2016, 27). When Messina shrieks “If you’re not a man and you’re not a woman, (...) what are you?” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2397), Meiji claims “I’m a ... person!” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2397). This way, Meiji attempts to resist all advances on her, contrary to the other candidates’ sense of gratitude towards the Mentors, who impose rules and regulations on them to restore the powerless and ironically assert their rights. The narrator says that Meiji understood, intellectually, that Rahm had been correct to refer to her as a woman, yet she did not consider herself one: “she had the breasts, the double-folded slit between her legs and the internal organs. Nevertheless, she did not consciously use that word to describe herself. The fact had to be dragged out into the open as a statement made by others” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2628).

This quotation provides evidence of the reinforced and hegemonised woman/feminine/vulva vs man/masculine/penis dichotomy, sanctioned by the biomedical discourse that upholds an essentialist notion of gender affirmation. On the other hand, Butler states that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, 43–44). If gender is constituted performatively through repeated acts, we can understand Meiji’s trans-masculinity as a repetition of the constituent practices of masculine femininity, and not as the masculine mind in the female body found in sexual inversion.

The Mentors in the Island insist on making her a woman and on the erasure of any possible queerness in her: “she’s that rare jewel, a perfect, unblemished virginal girl (...) she is exactly as scarred as any of our more typical girls. At least they know what they are. She doesn’t. When she began to speak after her recovery, she didn’t even know how to use female pronouns. She kept using it instead of she” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1983). As a consequence, the Mentors purport to teach Meiji how to become a woman: “She will go into training to be a Sacred Bearer. She will be schooled in the classical tradition of giving birth, including the full, nine-month gestation. And she will, with the blessings of our entire community of Islands, enjoy the experience of true, natural motherhood” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2260). This resonates with what Sandy Stone has remarked regarding the practice of certain medical professionals in gender clinics who needed to provide “evidence” that a complete medical, surgical and social gender transition would end the gender dysphoria syndrome their patients (ideal candidates for treatment) had been diagnosed in order to fulfil their agendas, thus proving that social constructions of sex and gender are rooted in biological essentialism. According to Stone, the trans women: “who presented as wanting to be women didn’t always ‘behave like’ women”, so that the professionals in those clinics would prefer their selected candidates to charm school in order to fulfil gender roles and presentations that were expected of women at the time (1992, 290).

Meiji is forced to have her memories wiped, according to her peer candidate Alarie, for her “own good” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2354). However, Meiji rebels against such treatment: “They took our memories without asking! Now I have nothing but my name. I don’t know where I am, don’t know where I came from” (...) what is safe? when strangers can reach inside my brain and take away whatever they want?” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 2354). Even after that, Meiji associates safety and security with not to being in the Recovery room of the Island, but with the wearing of the synthetic penis. It is possible to suggest, then, that the recovery of these memories allows for the realignment of a selfhood that, within both novels, has so far been depicted as transmasculine or agendered. We could argue that this can be an example of transexual men interpreted by feminists as “traitors”, as according to some authors, in their transitioning they denounced their feminist politics for male privilege (Hines 2005, 2007; Monro and Warren 2004; Halberstam 1998). Surely, the gender/sex binaries are destabilised by gender/sex fluidity and

having Meiji as a trans male protagonist is a significant step forward in terms of representation, a queer character who was never taught during her childhood that her body marked her out as a victim or endowed her with a clear biological destiny. Moreover, the saga also features characters who are transexual women, or “transies” in the terminology of this futuristic world: one is Youngest, who, as mentioned above, was forced by the Estate General to undergo a vaginoplasty, and therefore passes as a woman called Yasmine; the other is Alia, who voluntarily underwent a transexual transition towards womanhood, and became Yasmine’s companion in their way to and from the opposed lands. The difference is made clear when Alia says to Yasmine: “I am a transie. Maybe that’s why I have feelings. More than you, because you are really a man, not a transie” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1065). Monro quotes Seabrook (1997) to explain that with the advent of British colonialism in the Indian subcontinent, the established social position of transgender and intersex people was consistently undermined, for example by the British removing their land rights. This resulted in the fact that “most Hijras belong to the poorer castes and classes, and economic marginalisation structures their experiences very heavily” (Monro 2010, 250), and also that they illustrate intersectionality as “their operation is a product of caste, class, and colonialism related inequalities, as well as the gender and sexuality inequalities that permeate Indian society” (2010, 251). The novels are very descriptive about the sexual abuses Alia suffers in the hands of the Estate General, making clear all the suffering she has to endure up to the moment she may use her subaltern position to defeat the monster who has so sadistically abused her.

Alia tells Yasmine that her father used to rape her and hated her because “he knew that unlike other boys who became transies for money, I was a transie deep in my heart. In my blood, in my soul” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1065). Alia seems to represent the Kothi communities in India. Though it is a heterogeneous group, the judgement implemented by the Supreme Court of India in 2014 uses this word to refer to biological males who show varying degrees of being effeminate, among other groups of transgender people encompassed in the category of “third gender” (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India). Alia’s relationship with her father is that of subjugation, similar to hijras’ relation to their abusive gurus. He verbally abuses his daughter, uses her as a servant in every sense and brutally assaults her. There are also explicit descriptions of the way the General later uses Alia as a sexual slave, which makes

her a perfect illustration of transmisogyny in India and of the precarious condition trans people are placed in, when a society refuses to give the third gender any space. Padmanabhan is committed to denouncing the treatment transexual people receive in her country, where although the third gender has been legally recognised, their lives remain fraught as there is sex trade and exploitation and a constantly humiliated cast out. We need to clarify that after the publication of the saga, some rights have been gained. A bill was passed after a lot of controversial debate to finally become an act of the Parliament of India, The Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act of 2019, but it was much criticised by transgenders as it included regressive provisions of the Supreme Court judgement in 2014 for neglecting the recommendations made by the Standing Committee and the transgender community. For instance, hijras can self-identify as women, but are disqualified as such when they contest elections or quotas.

After becoming a transie, Yasmine was marked out with a dark blue hijab as “a transexual in the pleasure industry” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 41). Actually, life for transies in the saga is reduced to “ply[ing] their trade” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1213), denouncing this way the fate of these communities in India. In the Forbidden Country, men have sex with other men and Generals can choose certain men to be transformed through vaginoplasty into transexuals for the pleasure of this ruling class. The Estate General revelled in this power to alter the human body, describing Youngest to Alia in the following terms: “He is, after all, irresistible, not a feem, such as you are, but a genuine reversi. It’s a term I coined myself: a man who, against his will, against his nature, is forced to change his body into that of a ... well, I call them Vermin. Non-men. Those who are born in nature yet are unfit to belong to the ranks of men” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 1350). Likewise, Alia saw Yasmine as “more of a “he”—” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 434). Even Amir, Alia’s abusive father, agreed: “you’re no transie. You’re a man. Am I right?” to which Yasmine answers “I have body of a women” and Amir replies “but not the mind (...) The way you move, the way you talk (...) the way you stand and hold yourself: it is with pride, with dignity. A man’s dignity” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 513). That is why the Island Mentors made every effort to also teach Youngest, using advanced technology, how to more fully “become” Yasmine, and this included leaving behind the masculine entitlement to sexual pleasure, which can be interpreted as another abusive mechanism of control.

The whole world in the saga rests on technological progress under the control of an elite who uses it to subjugate the rest. One of the main characteristics of life in every corner of this futuristic land is that all areas use mechanisms of surveillance and communication (a dystopian variation of Foucault's panopticon). Different forms of surveillance, such as audio chips permanently embedded in the upper jaws, tiny robotic cameras above the crowd, wall monitors, etc. serve to control everyone, adopting a panoptic way of disciplining individuals as totalitarian regimes do (Foucault 1995; Friedman 2011). The dominating elite, the Generals in the Forbidden Country and the Mentors in the Island use these technical apparatuses to achieve two major objectives: subordination by constant monitoring, and thwarting the pull for resistance.

However, the trans protagonists endure adversities due to their vulnerability, that is transformed into resistance brought about through their resilient condition. Marianne Hirsch stated that as embodied species, "we share a common vulnerability emerging from the condition of living in bodies and in time. But, importantly, vulnerability is also socially, politically, and economically created and unequally imposed" (2014, 337), and that it is precisely an acknowledgement of vulnerability, both shared and produced, which can "open a space of interconnection as well as a platform for responsiveness and for resistance (2014, 337). In Hirsch's direction, the trans characters Alia, Yasmine and Meiji show an elasticity that enables adaptation to the circumstances, which allows them to undergo changes that grant them power, as they grow stronger and more connected to others. Two of them are presented as vulnerable victims of sexual abuse, but they enact subversion through resilience. This way, the trans characters are portrayed as agents—risk-taking subjects, in Nivedita Menon's terms (2004, 142–143). As Bracke (2016) stated, survival can be linked to collective transformation and to social revolt and that rebellion involves subversion. Therefore, resilience leads to a change, to the creation of a new social structure that undoes those structures of control and limitation. In the protagonists' transit nature on the margins, they forge a solidarity stemming from their being similarly and violently abused by the General. This alienated group is determined to guarantee their own survival and so, after a dramatic denouement, the saga ends on a faint note of hope. As Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont put it, this show of resilience can be interpreted as "the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organisation, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it" (2013,

2). Therefore, from subaltern resilience (where the subaltern position is maintained), the protagonists go to the resilience of vulnerability (where the vulnerable group resists at the same time that is transformed).

Consequently, the author provides stories of resilience and resistance, which allow for the possibility of integrating changes to defy extant structures of sexual abuse and domination and to transform the situation of the vulnerable. Padmanabhan presents the Generals as the enemies, as they hate (kill and/or rape) trans and cis women. The Generals' own utopian plans have created a place for resistance (the Island) that is also essentialist, as their idea of "restoration" does not welcome non-binary options. The Mentors function in such a way that the candidates are by and large unable to resist any "advances" on their bodies and their lives, as they have to express their gratitude for the sudden elevation of their lifestyle and for access to the improved facilities (thanks to advanced technology) provided for them. This sense of gratitude makes them slavishly accept the rules and regulations and ultimately turns them powerless to assert their rights. However, Meiji manages to resist all "advances" on her, thus representing a powerful non-binary character featuring a strong sense of resistance to all forms of domination. Similarly, Alia manages to reverse the control the Estate General has over her by killing him (though there are more clone Generals) and by unveiling his plans to take global his genocide of cis women and intersex people. We could, then, argue that the trans characters, as subaltern subjects, employ the strategies of resistance to become agents of their own stories.

12.4 CONCLUSIONS: FEMINIST SOLIDARITY

In general terms, the author seems to criticise the multiple dimensions of social inequality that come into establishing a human condition in which the technological apparatus is at the disposal of the ruling classes (either men in the Forbidden Country or women in the Island). The novels analysed in this chapter suggest the implications of this situation by presenting the extent to which those affected by the changes suffer and how they surrender themselves in order to survive, even though eventually they learn to resist and to make use of their vulnerable condition to join forces and transform their precarious realities. Padmanabhan's fiction appears to draw from her perception of the transformation in the world order due to globalising tendencies, where transnational movements are forbidden and international trade is controlled by a global governance, new modes of

communication and cultural deterritorialisation. As a result, the premises for the creation of the WWU in the saga bring into being even more precarious conditions of the vulnerable groups than the Time Before.

The rulers' essentialist belief in their sex supremacy (the opposed binary cis males and females, paramount in their own regions, as in a battle of the sexes well represented in the Zone) reminds the readers of the constraints regarding a terrible future where fluid genders are persecuted and women are not even allowed to exist. This situation, according to Tabish Khair (2016, 3–4) and Sara Ahmed (2004, 64–84), can create a sense of division and alignment that leaves some out and validates speeches and actions of hate and violence. Therefore, although the saga is presented as a segregation narrative—flipping from the Forbidden Country's prejudice against women and femininity to the Island's prejudice against men and anything associated with masculinity, and complicated by their own biological determinism—the presence of trans characters in the novels not only reconfirms the inevitable violence existing within the established binary, but also symbolises a strong desire to escape from governmental tyranny that promotes rigid categories.

While the General's regime curbs any dissent by keeping the citizens in a state of ignorance—the General claimed that “ignorance is power” (Padmanabhan 2015a, line 3669)—with lies, misinformation and propaganda, Mentor Vane claims that “Knowledge is power” (Padmanabhan 2015b, line 5477). As a consequence, the Mentors change their tactics and try to join forces with Alia, Meiji and Yasmine in order to get all the knowledge they have about the Forbidden Land with a double purpose: to put an end to violence against all women by intervening in The Zone and by disrupting the General's plan. This might lead to a complete turn in the way the Island works, a reversal of the use of technology and a democratic agreement that can grant the possibility of doing something good for the world in spite of the Generals' utopia of a land without any women, the WWU neocapitalist trafficking of women and Youngest's sacrifice of his own sex. However, these are left unfinished as a lead-in to the next novel in the saga, which Padmanabhan announced she is in the process of writing now (Navarro and Diego 2020). Chandra Mohanty (2003) made a firm critique of western feminism and globalisation as a step towards a feminism without any kind of borders. Having this in mind, we can conclude that, once the essentialism of two opposed worlds in the saga in a dystopian atmosphere has been exposed, the end of the

second novel invites the readers to think that there may be hope in collective resistance. It seems to suggest that intervening together in solidarity with a common purpose makes the trans resilient protagonists, who stand for the fluid genders, showcase a queerness that needs to be included in a plural feminist agenda fully engaged with the realities of every community.

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