

EDITORIAL

Special Issue: 'Vulnerability' within Contemporary Feminist Politics and Theory

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Keywords: vulnerability; feminist theory; feminist politics

This special issue of *Redescriptions* began after a conference that Mónica Cano Abadía planned and organized in July 2019, at the department of philosophy in the University of Graz, Austria. The conference, *Vulnerability, Gender, and Justice: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, was designed to address the multilayered dimensions of vulnerability, intertwined with issues involving gender and justice. The conference encouraged sharing interdisciplinary perspectives within contemporary feminism that would provide analytical tools for understanding vulnerability and situations of precarity and also further explore the possibilities of agency and critical engagement within social relations and institutions. Mónica invited several keynote presenters to Graz, whose presentations have resulted in articles in this special issue.

The conference, as well as the decision to edit a collection on it, was inspired by the recognition that the concept of vulnerability currently acts as one of the most frequently used concepts to express, gather, and develop thought within feminist scholarship. There was no goal of providing one consistent view or of covering all the meanings and purposes for which the concept of vulnerability is put to use; rather, the aim was to provide a display of the diversity of powerful thought that is conducted with it, which became highly evident in the Graz conference. There are profound discussions in political thought with philosophical undertones, which are expressed through contemporary discussions on vulnerability. Simultaneously, the term is used to express some of the most pressing injustices that call for feminist action.

At the time of the conference, we all travelled and met in person with no particular sense of vulnerability in doing so. Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed a shared vulnerability to illness and death in a way that we could not have imagined then – and it has also emphasized how we are not all exposed to it equally, although we are interconnected, and often act in solidarity. The Covid-19 pandemic has not made the issues of vulnerability which were discussed during the conference any less significant; if anything, these vulnerabilities have only intensified since then. Amongst those, two particular areas of the unequal distribution of vulnerability were especially evident: the deathscapes at the European maritime borders and the persistent racialized vulnerability that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement expresses. These and other areas of intense contemporary political debate are addressed in this special issue through multiple theoretical positions that the issue of vulnerability has brought forward in feminist debates.

Athena Athanasiou's powerfully written contribution, '(Im)possible Breathing: On Courage and Criticality in the Ghostly Historical Present', introduces several themes which recur also in the other articles of this issue. Most importantly, the article introduces the theme of breathing and (un)breathability. This acts as something more than a metaphor, given the death of George Floyd after a US police officer pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, and the way BLM activists powerfully evoked that event with the slogan, 'I can't breathe'. Athanasiou interrogates the unjust conditions of black killability in the US, the repeated, immeasurable unbreathability, which produces the lives of black people and other racialized others as situated in the margins of what is considered to be human. She reflects on the countless processes of othering that are linked to differential allocations of vulnerability and uneven conditions of breathability. The article draws a convincing connection between anti-black violence in the US, which is saturated by the aftermath of slavery, and the European anti-immigration policies that cut the breath of people who drown in the Mediterranean Sea.

The topics of racist anti-black brutality and white supremacist 'necropolitics' in Mbembe's sense, connects Athanasiou's article with Mareike Gebhardt's, 'To Make Live and Let Die: On Sovereignty and Vulnerability in the EU Migration Regime'. Gebhardt's piece focuses on recent EU anti-migration discourses of othering and dehumanizing, using the analytical lens of vulnerability within the EU politics of the Mediterranean. Gebhardt revisits Foucault and Mbembe to analyze the bio- and necropolitical administration of the racialization and dehumanization of the migrant other, and writes of grievability as being linked to that vulnerability. Through analysis of media images, Gebhardt shows how little grievability is granted to those who are left to die in the Mediterranean sea.

In terms of feminist politics, Athanasiou and Gebhardt both join in the effort to turn vulnerability into a possibility for action rather than placing the emphasis on the victim position. Here, vulnerability is seen as a site of resistance that opens the perspective of understanding interdependence. Athanasiou attends to what she calls 'relational vulnerability as a condition of making claims of transformative justice'; and argues that one form of intervention would be to 'politically mobilize vulnerability as a site of critical resignification' in order to develop a 'collective critical affectivity', and a 'breathing together, breathing otherwise'. Vulnerability becomes disconnected from more or less vulnerable, or invulnerable individuality, as well as from an essentializing view of general vulnerability, and is instead turned into a differentiated, and differentiating historical condition.

Another theme, which appears in Athanasiou's article and is revisited in other articles as well, is an exploration of time and temporality, present and past, and the memory of past connected with vulnerability. Athanasiou addresses breathing as a question of 'racialized temporality', as a 'long and continuous present tense', a time of living death defined by duration or ongoingness that formats memory as much as political imagination and activism. The article provides a historical, literary, and conceptual account of how the im/possibility of breathing carries with it a long history of racialized politics, referring to the hold of the slave ship, the working conditions of plantations, and industrial capitalism.

Mónica Cano Abadía, in her article 'Fiction of Invulnerability: Silence and Otherness in Francoist Spain', also approaches the politics of memory concerning the victims of the Spanish civil war from the point of view of a disremembered past which haunts the present. She emphasizes the importance of mourning and grief as practices of re-remembering that have the power to dismember dominant narratives, and as a way of doing justice to the present by invoking the phantasmatic presence of the past. The labour of remembrance constitutes an act that dislocates the willful ignorance that protects hegemonic narratives, which work as processes of othering.

Both Gebhardt and Cano Abadía understand vulnerability existing in distinct opposition to a phantasy of sovereignty and mastery that foster the discourses of othering. This theme of sovereign invulnerability is thoroughly explored by Adriana Zaharijević's article, 'Be the Master of your Island! On the Desire to be Bodiless', which centers around the figure of Robinson Crusoe. Everyone knows Robinson Crusoe as a classic literary figure, but he acts equally as a figure not only of colonialism but also of that sovereign mastery which is a widely-held hegemonic ideal within political thought, as Zaharijević elegantly points out in her contribution. The colonial mastery of Crusoe as a literary figure, as Zaharijević shows, rules over bodies, in particular black and female.

The invulnerability and sovereignty of the fantasy of political agency, which is central to Adriana Zaharijević's analysis, is also present in other accounts of political agency, whether individual or collective. Monica Cano Abadía discusses the Spanish state as dealing with its history of accounting of itself as an invulnerable subject that masters its history and present; and Cano, along with most of the other article writers in this issue, also link their discussions of vulnerability and political agency to Judith Butler's writings on the subject, and to political agency as being vulnerable.

In the final article of the issue, Tuija Pulkkinen explores Butler's use of the concept of vulnerability through bringing it into comparison with the use of the same concept by Adriana Cavarero in 'Vulnerability and the Human in Judith Butler's and Adriana Cavarero's Feminist Thought. A Politics of Philosophy Point of View'. One of the key aspects that is often regarded as linking Cavarero's and Butler's work is how they understand vulnerability in terms of relationality. However, Pulkkinen focuses on the differences that exist in their respective politics in relation to philosophical traditions. She argues that Butler's rejection of the foundational, transcendental human subject of the philosophical tradition leads Butler to be most concerned with the norms that constitute what is understood as human, and consequently, in those practices of othering that call for political action, which are also present in this special issue.

The interest in the universally human is replaced by recognition of particular times and places where some are deemed less human, more vulnerable, and less worthy of life. In this special issue, these include BLM and the deaths in the Mediterranean. Although during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, consciousness of general mortality of human beings is highly present, it is clear that vulnerability to mortality due to the pandemic is highly variable: it is crucial to understand who are more likely to die due to the virus and are the ones that are the most vulnerable in this situation.

Vulnerability as a shared human condition of bodily existence and relationality; vulnerability as historically changing condition and unequally distributed to different populations; invulnerability as a fantasy of individual and collective subjects; vulnerability turned into a resource of political action rather than victimization and as a resource in collective mobilizing. These and other topics of ongoing debates on vulnerability within feminist theorizing are present and approached in multiple ways in the articles of this collection. Together with the book reviews, which add significantly to the issue, these articles are capable of presenting just one slice of all the work that is presently being done within feminist theory on 'vulnerability'. As a concept, it is unique in that it captures both the feelings of current injustices while also some of the most complicated feminist thought in its relation to philosophy, literature, and political theory.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Abadía, Mónica Cano and Tuija Pulkkinen. 2020. "Special Issue: 'Vulnerability' within Contemporary Feminist Politics and Theory." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23(2), pp. 88–91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.345>

Submitted: 13 November 2020 **Accepted:** 13 November 2020 **Published:** 15 December 2020

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