

The Life of Others: Narratives of Vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Canada and Beyond* looks into contemporary Canadian cultural production in English through the Butlerian notions of vulnerability and precarity. It aims to provide a critical view of the field with an emphasis on the discursive modes that address, critique or produce vulnerability on local and global scales.

RESUMEN

Este número especial de *Canada and Beyond* examina la producción cultural contemporánea canadiense en lengua inglesa bajo la lente de las nociones butlerianas de vulnerabilidad y precariedad. Su objetivo es proporcionar una visión del campo que enfatice los modos discursivos que analizan, critican, o producen vulnerabilidad a nivel local y global.



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In her Levinasian discussion of the functioning of ethical obligations in the face of global and local forms of precarity, Judith Butler links the production of vulnerability to a situation of “up againstness” or “unwilled adjacency,” of one’s involvement in a relation of proximity that has not been chosen (“Precarious Life” 134). Vulnerability in those cases arises from the realization that “one’s life is also the life of others”, and that “the bounded and living appearance of the body is the condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us” (141). Itself the site of production of various forms of violence and vulnerability, this adjacency can also trigger the affective and creative engagements necessary for action (134).

These issues are crucial in contemporary Canada, where debates over citizenship and social justice often take place within complex transnational, transcultural, and (post) colonial contexts as well as alongside the historical experiences of settlement and migration, with their contested forms of national or cultural belonging (see, for instance, Kamboureli and Kim). Additionally, Canada’s humanitarian tradition is increasingly challenged by old and new conditions of global violence, environmental threats, and social and political unrest (see Thobani). Canadian literatures do not merely reflect on these conditions but engage with them, exploring the aesthetic possibilities of what could be thought of as a reconnection between the text and the world (see, for instance, Grace). How does cultural production articulate and propose strategies of resistance to the widespread production of vulnerability? Are the examples of resilience offered by Canadian literature, film, and visual arts able to reactivate ethical responsibility and political activism?

Contributors were invited to offer a critical examination of Canadian cultural production with special attention to these questions. We also invited research articles that would interpret the present condition of (un)willed adjacency in its real and metaphoric possibilities: that is, as a site of production of violence and vulnerability, but also (potentially) of lucid creativity, exposing, soliciting, seducing “in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us.”

The following articles have been selected for publication in this special issue on the basis of their ability to engage with the topic, and the strength of their argument in so doing. They all provide valuable discussions of important issues such as ecological vulnerability,

colonial violence and indigenous activism, migration and war narratives, precarious labour, xenophobia and racism, emotional precarity, sexuality and desire, queer creativities, narrative ethics and the post-truth. Two articles employ explicitly comparative methodologies (Ganz and Orán Llarena). Whereas all six works show a tendency towards transdisciplinarity, two are specifically so by the very nature of their primary sources, dealing with a documentary narrative (Ganz) and a graphic novel (Díaz Cano). Three articles look into contemporary novels (Staels, Liu, Mikalson), while one is dedicated to the analysis of film (Orán Llarena). Together, they present a range of answers and open different entries into the complex issues posed by the CFP.

The first article, “‘Now I Am Become Death’: Japanese and Canadian Industrial Contamination in Michiko Ishimure’s *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minamata Disease* and Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*,” by Shoshannah Ganz, opens with a comparative discussion of the representation of ecological vulnerability in two important texts about the effects of mercury poisoning, one from Japan and the other from Canada; Ishimure’s documentary work deals with the first incident of this type in Minamata Bay, Japan, caused by pollution from the nearby Chisso Corporation’s factory in the 1950s, while King’s fiction is concerned with the consequences of the mercury contamination resulting from the chemical process at the Dryden pulp and paper plant in the Indigenous community of Grassy Narrows, Ontario, in the 1970s. The analysis of the reclaiming of the previously polluted land for recreational purposes in King’s novel vis-à-vis the actual recovery of Minamata city for the tourist industry proves the capacity of both texts to engage with the meaningful debates of post-industrial global literature. Moreover, by focusing on two specific incidents of contamination in two distant countries along with their lethal effects on the respective communities and through two very different texts, this article underscores the possibilities of literature and ecocriticism to work hand in hand with activists, journalists and community leaders to denounce ecological violence and produce an environmental consciousness at the planetary level.

Hilde Staels’ “The Unsettling Portrayal of Migrant Existence in Rawi Hage’s Urban Fiction” focuses on the vulnerability of the migrant body by reading Hage’s novels *Carnival* (2012) and *Cockroach* (2008), both set in Montreal, through the visual device of the grotesque. Drawing on a Bakhtinian and postcolonial framework of theories of cultural and species hybridity as well as Julia Kristeva’s work on abjection, this article relies on the grotesque as a function of subversion of ontological classifications and, as such, an effective instrument of socio-political critique for the migrant writer. Staels probes the notion of the human within the specific debate about the ethical values of Canada’s official multicultural-

alism to argue that, in Hage's fiction, the disorderly and disturbing representation of the male immigrant protagonist works through the grotesque mode to effect the destabilization of the multicultural body. Hage's narrative distance in both novels further advances this critique by increasing the sense of extreme isolation and estrangement in the reader. The presence of the abject as an object of disgust unveils the city's hostility towards the racialized other. Ultimately, the author claims, texts like Hage's highlight the precarity of the immigrant condition against the supposed benevolence of the multicultural state.

Also concerned with social isolation and hostility, "Chinatown Children during World War Two in *The Jade Peony*," by Zhen Liu, combines Judith Butler's definition of vulnerability as a situation of "up-againstness" and Mary Louise Pratt's theorization of the "contact zone" to approach the representation of Vancouver's Chinatown childhood in Wayson Choy's novel. This article's emphasis is on how the multiple modes of production of vulnerability affecting Chinese Canadians in the 1930s and 1940s include outside and inside, vertical and horizontal vectors of community and family relationships, as well as racism, chauvinism and sexism within and without the ghettoized community. Rather than as a "contact zone," then, which for Pratt is the space of creativity, Vancouver's Chinatown is perceived as a site of fear and anxiety about what Renisa Mawani has called "intimate proximities," a threatening mode of unwanted contact affecting the relations between Chinese Canadians and white Canadians, but also, equally prominent in Choy's book, between the former and the Japanese Canadian community, with whom they share urban space. The reading carefully reveals the particular elements by which the children characters in *The Jade Peony* are especially vulnerable to these multiple entries of violence and hostility that traverse the space of Chinatown.

In "Controlled Bodies, Mental Wounds: Vulnerability in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*," Coral Anaid Díaz Cano discusses the aptness of the graphic novel genre to mark the various sites of the subject's vulnerability through the artistic juxtaposition between images and words. The author draws on Butler's notions of linguistic injury as well as her definition of the domain of the (un)sayable to interrogate Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's story of a teenage Japanese Canadian girl struggling through affective relations that she has not always chosen, and the subtle modes of xenophobia that impinge on her life, acting in performative repetition. The focus on the tension between the visual and the linguistic, epitomized in the work by the presence of surveilling methods of institutional control over the protagonist and her classmates, succeeds in producing an interpretative transdisciplinary space in which the dismantling of classic binaries such as visible/invisible or silence/sound finds rich ground. Ultimately, Díaz Cano argues, through the hybridity of the genre, *Skim*

manages to trespass and subvert the domain of the unsayable, highlighting, in so doing, the strategic possibilities of graphic novels to resist linguistic aggression, silencing and control.

Kaarina Mikalson's "The best tradition of womanhood': Negotiating and Reading Identities in Emma Donoghue's *Landing*" offers a different take on sexuality and race. Starting from an intersectional approach to identity, the author explores the vulnerability of those whose nationality, race and sexual orientation clash with white heteronormative social structures as well as the tension produced at the intersection between different identity positions outside those structures. The reading zooms in on the intricacies of the love relationship between Donoghue's two female characters, white Canadian Jude from Ireland, Ontario, and South Asian Irish Síle from Dublin, Ireland, in the globalized context of travelling and electronic communication and through uneven personal circumstances. Inspired by Aihwa Ong's approach to citizenship and Sara Ahmed's articulations of queer mobilities and femme identity, the reading locates Donoghue's novel as part of the growing body of discourses of queer nationality both in Canada and Ireland. At the same time, Mikalson inquires into the validity of those discourses to resist the still dominant positions of social and cultural power.

Fabián Orán Llarena closes the volume with the article "Apocalypses Now: Two Modes of Vulnerability in *Last Night* and *The Mist*," a comparative analysis of human vulnerability in two apocalyptic films. Positing the apocalypse as the ultimate situation of exposure and, more specifically, of human awareness of injurability and death, Orán Llarena's Butlerian interpretation of *Last Night* (Don McKellar, 1998, Canada) and *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007, USA) provides rich ground for the study of sociality and the possibilities of ethical engagements through affect. Moreover, a comparative reading of the two films reveals interesting contrasts in the modes of approach and articulation of the body's vulnerability. The author convincingly explains these contrasts in terms of the differing takes on national identity between Canada and the United States as well as the films' radically distinct temporalities: while McKellar's atypical pre-9/11 work approaches human vulnerability as a locus of ethical cohabitation, Darabont's post-9/11 take places considerable emphasis on the violence of human exposure, rearticulating the discourses of risk at the heart of the American ethos.

All the essays probe the political potential of literature, denouncing the hegemonic structures that produce vulnerability and examining the power of the cultural to resist and subvert those structures. They also succeed in looking at human vulnerability as a site of

creativity, exposure and seduction. As the epigraph to Orán Llarena's article reads, "Let's face it. We're undone by each other" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 23).

The Creative Writing section, curated by angela rawlings, completes this volume with an intriguing and provocative selection of unpublished work predicated on similar processes of facing and undoing each other, of living, sharing, exposing and confronting one's own life and the life of others.

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