

Can Female Resistance Emerge from Vulnerability?

Babett Rubóczki

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016. x + 336. ISBN 978-0-8223-6290-6. Pbk. \$26.95.

Posing the provocative and seemingly contradictory questions if “there is agency in suffering” (29) and whether “resistance require[s] overcoming vulnerability” (13), the edited volume, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, challenges the widely accepted assumption that vulnerability and resistance are in a mutually exclusive relationship. The introductory essay by the editors, Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, elucidates that while current sociological studies take up on the customary discourse of precarity to pinpoint economic factors of employment and existential insecurity in (post-)welfare countries, they still largely dismiss the gendered dimension of sociopolitical vulnerability. Focusing on diverse female practices of resistance—ranging from political demonstrations and media visibility to cultural practices of clothing and artistic expressions of photography and staged performance—the contributors highlight that vulnerability, traditionally gendered as a female disposition to political precarity and injurability, is subversively used as a departure point for female minorities’ political struggle to oppose racially discriminative national policies predominating Palestine, Turkey, Greece, France, and Serbia.

The typographical display of the volume’s title (together with the cover featuring Ghadeer Wagdy’s graffiti art) deserves special credit for its visually succinct way to convey the collection’s distinctive critical approach toward the contested preclusion of vulnerability and resistance. The discontinuous pecked line—inserted between the title words of “in Resistance” displayed in red under the grey word “Vulnerability”—signals the lack of stiff conceptual boundaries between vulnerability and resistance and highlights their theoretical porosity. Therefore, the intermittent grey line is an apt graphic gesture which precisely conveys the book’s originality that resides in its critical readjustment of the binary relation between vulnerability and resistance as permeable. Taking away the visual focus from the word “Vulnerability” in muted gray and redirecting it to the more emphatic and eye-catching red-colored “in Resistance” typographically articulates a perceptual shift in theorizing vulnerability which is pivotal to the volume. The thirteen essays relocate the critical focus from the predominantly reductive readings of vulnerability as a paralyzed condition of female victimhood and seek to

reconfigure vulnerability as a source and tactical tool of feminist political resistance and agency.

The transnational feminist angle the book presents, as the editors also underline, is the fruitful outcome of the authors' participation in the workshop titled "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance: Feminism and Social Change" organized by the prominent poststructuralist feminist Judith Butler and political philosopher Zeynep Gambetti in Istanbul, in 2013. Created with the purpose of alliance building among the culturally and theoretically divergent participant scholars the workshop appears to be instrumental in producing the volume as a manifesto of an alternative type of feminist activism structured around the mobilization of female vulnerability as a source of social change.

The featured essays' (almost self-evident) reliance on Butler's well-established feminist theories regarding gender performativity, the linguistic framing of violence, grievability, and precarity—which she defines as an ontological condition of political vulnerability shared by all human beings—establish illuminating dialogues between Butler's theories and the contributors' geographically anchored explorations of women's vulnerability. However, despite the editorial stress on the "polyphonic mode" (7) of the book, referring to both the manifold conceptual lens (including, but not limited to, hegemony, mourning, representation, public demonstration) as well as the geopolitical variation of women's sociopolitical precariousness across national borders, it seems that the collection as a whole predominantly enriches the Butlerian body of feminist criticism. While the application and expansion of various concepts by Western feminist thinkers, including Butler and Hannah Arendt, not at all diminishes the value of each contributor's insightful analysis, further articulation (or formulation) of culturally specific feminist theories or concepts—especially in essays engaged in non-Western countries' representations of female vulnerability—would have been most welcome.

As for the editorial choice regarding the arrangement of the texts, while the articles are not organized into thematic clusters they show conceptual overlaps. The critical engagement with vulnerable bodies in street protests and public demonstrations constitutes one of the main focal points of the volume. In the opening chapter, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," Butler takes the protest in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, in September 2014 as her departure point to illustrate that the participants' articulation of their reliance on and need for legal and political protection validate the reinterpretation of dependence as a form of vulnerability which is constitutive, rather than exclusive, of political resistance.

The Occupy Gezi protests of 2013 in Turkey are a recurring example in a number of essays but probably the most in-depth and engaging interpretations are provided by Gambetti's "Risking Oneself and One's Identity: Agonism Revisited." The author characterizes the encounters among the culturally diverse groups of protestors as agonistic. Evoking Hannah Arendt's political theory of agonism, defined as the interplay of acting and suffering (28-31), Gambetti elucidates that the protestors did not merely act together as a monolithic group against their shared vulnerability to state oppression. The peculiarity of the Istanbul demonstrations, as Gambetti advances, lies in the fact that the events unveiled the protestors racial, ethnic, and gender differences which also made them vulnerable to one another (37-40). Providing a different but equally insightful analysis of the Occupy Gezi protests, Basak Ertür in "Barricades: Resources and Residues of Resistance" explores the spatial practice of barricading monumental places, including the Taksim Square in Istanbul, which she identifies as a counter-monumentalizing act of resistance.

The volume pays considerable attention to the affective and politically enabling power embedded in vulnerability. Athena Athanasiou connects agonism and mourning with "The Women in Black" feminist actions of 1991, Serbia. The series of weekly demonstrations of women appearing in the Republic Square of Belgrade dressed in black aimed to oppose the Serbian biopolitics of warfare. Athanasiou contends that a feminist act of resistance underlies these demonstrations, which is displayed through the women's public performance of mourning (256-58). Signifying the embrace rather than the denial of vulnerability to death, the protestors challenge the Serbian political rhetoric that dismisses the prevalence of precarity the female population is increasingly exposed to. Presenting an affect-oriented argument, Leticia Sabsay's concluding essay of the volume, "Permeable Bodies: Vulnerability, Affective Powers, Hegemony," revisits agonism to highlight that vulnerable forms of subjectivity are pre-requisite for transindividual relations, by which she means Bakhtin's view that "we live in a dialogue and can only come to know ourselves through the perspective of others" (286).

Demonstrating a related interest in the notion of grief and the biopolitics of vulnerability Nükhet Sirman's investigates Kurdish feminists' struggle to expose how the denied right to the grievability of bodies is a crucial tool for the Turkish state to render the Kurdish minority politically invalid and non-representable. Meltem Ahiska's polemics furthers the dialogue of Sirman's paper and elaborates on the double edged sword of victimized women's increasing visibility and representation in the Turkish media. The paper is a testimony to Ahiska's attentiveness to the discursive dangers

involved in romanticizing Kurdish women's physical vulnerability as an applicable tool to gain political recognition. Her paper makes explicit that although Kurdish women's struggle for political acknowledgement remains an important target, the achievement of social and discursive visibility does not fulfill the Kurdish minority's goal to be recognized as humans whose lives (and bodies) matter.

The emphasis on vulnerability as inflicted on the skin of women is a shared concern of three authors, Elena Tzelepis, Rema Hammami, and Elsa Dorlin, who consider displaying the female body as a potential means of resistance against biopolitical intervention and state surveillance. While Tzelepis concentrates on Mona Hatoum's provocative artistic expressions of feminist resistance as mediated by the animalized and discarded female body of Palestine women, Hammami highlights the politically and legally unrecognized (or ungrievable) Palestinian communities' countervisibility strategies in the Israeli occupied zone of the West Bank. Hammami explicates the underlying controversy in how politically unintelligible and invisible minority women resist Israeli soldiers' "colonial logic of elimination" (172) by "actively seeking and making linkages with intelligible bodies" (174) of Israeli and international activists. Diverting from the Palestine feminist actions to counter social invisibility Dorlin chooses to focus on a western European dilemma of bodily exposure. In "Bare Subjectivities: Faces, Veils, and Masks in the Contemporary Allegories of Western Citizenship," Dorlin discusses "the mandatory hypervisibility [in France] that informs the debates on the niqab" (9).

Probably two of the most engaging papers that provoke alertness to the contradictions inherent in the political and artistic portrayal of vulnerability are Sarah Bracke's "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience" and Marianne Hirsch's "Vulnerable Times." Bracke's chapter strikes out with its unusually daring criticism of the neoliberal politics of the United States. She contends that the increasingly applied rhetoric of the resilient subject, who can "bounce back" to the state of invulnerability after suffering environmental or military attacks, serves as a neoliberal tool to create the deceptive image of the American national security system as one that can erase vulnerability (57-59). Hirsch's chapter also has a subtly critical vein in terms of the psychoanalytical concept of trauma, which, as the author implies, conceives vulnerability as the opposite of agency. Hirsch lucidly argues that the notion of vulnerability offers an alternative way of thinking about the temporality of trauma not as ultimately devastating for the subject but as reframeable into acts of strength and resistance (79-81).

The psychology of vulnerability also seems to leave its imprints on Elena Loizidou's paper, which expands the predominantly political discussion of vulnerability by underlining the realm of arts as a potential site for the expression of political activism. However, Loizidou's conceptual framework of dreams tends to echo psychoanalytical methods that explore traumatic vulnerability through unconscious fantasies. Thus, her paper seems to fit less smoothly into the theoretical framework of the volume, which aims to go beyond analyses regarding the psychologies of emotional vulnerability.

Although the conceptually and geopolitically multifaceted approaches to the discourse on vulnerability are truly revealing, a question may arise in the reader: is it possible to transfer the culturally specific performative acts of resistance presented by the essays to other cultural geographies of political marginalization? Although the volume refrains from providing the reader with a definite answer, the editors' characterization of the essays as "a series of provocation for further thought" (10) implies an encouragement for scholars to explore further intersections between precarity and political activism in additional cultural and national contexts.

In sum, *Vulnerability in Resistance* provides a wide variety of alternative theoretical approaches to feminist modes of resistance that do not deny sites of vulnerability but emerge from them. The collection is certainly indispensable for interdisciplinary-minded scholars interested in exploring new intellectual pathways of contemporary feminism that interweave social, political, and gender criticisms of vulnerability.

University of Debrecen