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VULNERABILITY AS A POLITICAL LANGUAGE

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In present-day public discussions, questions of power, agency, and the media are debated more intensely than ever as issues of injury or empowerment. Vulnerability has emerged as a key concept circulating in these discussions and their academic analyses. The #MeToo campaign, as well as its extensions like #TimesUp and versions in various languages across the globe, has been taken up as a key example of these tendencies, showing how the public articulation of experiences of injury, trauma, and hurt is now turning into a powerful worldwide movement. A collective of voices testifying to a persistent, repetitive vulnerability and injury caused by sexual harassment, assault, and abuse has, perhaps paradoxically, become praised as a feminist movement for empowerment, justice, and change, and a societal force to be reckoned with.

At the same time, the campaign has raised several questions: what are the limits of feminist politics that draws first and foremost on a shared public victimhood, or survivorship? How much of this vulnerability is shared, and by whom? Why is #MeToo having an impact only now, with wealthy and often white cis-women in Hollywood at the forefront of the movement, when the issue of sexual abuse and assault has been a key struggle in feminist, women of colour, and trans activisms for such a long time? What part does social media play in the successes and failures of activist efforts such as #MeToo, and how does it relate to broader media histories of addressing and representing painful issues and marginalised people?

One of the keys to the success of the #MeToo movement might be that potentially anyone might be the 'me' who has experienced sexual abuse – although, in practice, the people who have become the faces of the campaign primarily identify as cis-women. At the same time, the universalising

understanding of 'woman' and its equation to being a victim or vulnerable are some of the movement's most critiqued features. In that sense, the movement can be seen to differ from another recent highly publicised and ongoing social media and activist movement, #BlackLivesMatter, which centres black lives and steers clear of the confessional mode.[1] As George Yancy states in an interview with Judith Butler (Yancy and Butler, 2015), in #BlackLivesMatter there is a specific racial vulnerability at stake which must centralise blackness instead of any subject. While it is true that 'all' lives matter, black lives do not seem to be included in the category of lives that matter, since black men and women are killed without consequence by police officers in the United States. Black lives are concretely under threat and treated as disposable, and therefore it is urgent to call for them to matter.

What #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have in common is drawing public attention to serious, pervasive, life-destroying issues that have long been ignored by white patriarchal institutional and state power. What they both have also been accused of is that by claiming injury to a specific group, they dismiss the possibility of anyone's or everyone's vulnerability to that injury: that white people can also be killed by the police, that men can also be sexually abused. Here, vulnerability is paradoxically equated with power: a voice, an experience, or a life that matters, that is worthy of attention and compassion. But what happens to structures of privilege and marginalisation if vulnerability is understood as a universal condition of all (human) life? Such an ontological understanding of vulnerability, while true in the sense that all life is perishable, is often mobilised to discredit and undermine the validity of movements focusing on the culturally and politically produced vulnerability of specific groups.

Within feminist, queer, and anti-racist discussions, a key critique of the #MeToo campaign has addressed its whitewashing, exclusion of trans-identified and gender non-conforming people, and focus on wealthy cis-women in Hollywood, like Alyssa Milano, Salma Hayek, Uma Thurman, and Oprah Winfrey. The black American social activist Tarana Burke first launched the slogan 'Me too' in 2006 in her efforts to offer consolation, empathy, and relief from a sense of isolation to women of colour who experienced sexual abuse in underprivileged communities. These origins of the slogan and the movement were first left out entirely, as the campaign started spreading on social media through white actress Alyssa Milano's post on Twitter. The focus on white cis-women's experiences of sexual abuse could also be seen to overshadow the magnitude and severity of sexual assault on Native women, trans people and trans women of colour (Adetiba and Burke, 2017). These debates over whose injury and vulnerability matter more, or the most, raise important issues about structural inequalities between women and what can count as 'shared experience', but

also about how to measure levels of vulnerability, or if such measurement or 'competition' is desirable or possible at all. If a more severe injury or vulnerability should lead to more visibility and being more in the centre of campaigning, what is to be done about the vulnerability that visibility can bring, for example, to trans women of colour who may survive by passing as cis?

Many have doubted whether the #MeToo campaign can actually produce the kinds of changes that would be needed on societal and institutional levels, or if it will remain too focused on confession and personal experience. While the campaign has, by breaking the silence around sexual and gender-based harassment, aimed to relieve victims from shame and stigma, it has also been critiqued for imposing a duty to confess, remember, and draw attention to experiences that some may be unable or unwilling to share for the sake of their own safety and wellbeing. The flood of accounts and confessions of abuse on social media channels has prompted many to turn away from the campaign and its main platforms, as continuously encountering accounts of abuse can also feel re-traumatising for victims of similar abuse (Lamotte, 2017). Thus, paradoxically, representations and accounts of injury do not necessarily succeed in producing empowerment but can also injure themselves and help produce an emphasised sense of vulnerability. In comparison, #BlackLivesMatter has not been focused on confession at all, even if it has also demanded acknowledgement of injury and consequences for perpetrators, yet a similar re-traumatisation critique can be applied to its imagery as well.

In the midst of the debates about the #MeToo campaign's effectiveness, there is however no question about the campaign's affectivity: how it has mobilised enormous and powerful waves of feeling, from compassion to guilt, from shame to rage. A similar affective mobilisation applies to #BlackLivesMatter, and this affective charge not only applies to those accounting for their experiences of sexual abuse or demanding an end to state-sanctioned violence against black bodies. It also applies to white, straight, male subjects, those in privileged positions who feel that these demands for change are a threat or take something away from them. Twenty years ago, Lauren Berlant (1997) analysed the emergence of the privileged as 'injured', calling these subject 'citizen-victims' – ordinary people 'who now feel anxious about their value to themselves, their families, their publics, and their nation. They sense that they now have identities, when it used to be just other people who had them' (1997: 2). The double edge of vulnerability concretises in these moments when the feeling of injury gathers affective charge around and for the privileged: vulnerability is no longer (if it ever was) only about weakness or immobilisation, but very concretely about agency. Claims of vulnerability can translate to claims to agency and voice,

but these claims can have completely oppositional political consequences, depending on who is making them.

In this book we interrogate the tensions, complexities, and paradoxes of vulnerability in and through the media, particularly in feminist, queer, and anti-racist media cultures and debates about the production, use, and meanings of media. Our aim is, in particular, to make sense of the *new language of vulnerability* that has emerged through such tensions and paradoxes, investigating its historical legacies and contemporary effects. How do various understandings and claims to vulnerability mobilise affect? What are we expected to feel when seeing, reading, or telling narratives of injury – or empowerment? When can visibility and representations of difficult or hurtful experiences produce change, and when only more vulnerability? These questions are currently asked not only in the discussions around the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter campaigns but also, for example, in debates about 'trigger warnings' which are meant to alert viewers to potentially hurtful media content, and more broadly in discussions about reparative practices and the healing potential of activist media. These are also among the questions the writers of this book address. Through a broad range of original case studies addressing popular and activist media as well as public cultural and archival policies, they, and we, examine how *asymmetries of power are addressed, contested, and felt as issues of being or becoming vulnerable*. Furthermore, we map out and explore the consequences of different understandings of the concept of vulnerability for feminist, queer, and anti-racist efforts.

VULNERABILITY IN FEMINIST, QUEER, AND ANTI-RACIST THEORISING

While the power, proliferation, and complexity of the language of vulnerability in feminist and anti-racist media cultures have grown all the more evident, in academic discussions the concept of vulnerability has simultaneously become increasingly popular across various disciplines. Drawing from diverse philosophical and methodological traditions and investigating a wealth of issues, both theoretical and policy-related, the rich scholarship on vulnerability is nevertheless far from constituting a sense of a shared field of 'vulnerability studies' or otherwise.[2]

Deriving from the Latin word *vulnus* [wound], vulnerability expresses the capacity to be wounded and suffer. As bodily, social, and affective beings, we all have the capacity to be vulnerable to one another and to conditions of inequality, discrimination, exploitation, or violence, as well to the natural environment. Mobilising the concept therefore entails challenging

liberal notions of the individual subject as autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient, and somehow not touched by the capacity to be vulnerable. Mobilising vulnerability also means critiquing the ways in which this notion of the individual subject has implicitly been male, white, Eurocentric, cis-gendered, and able-bodied, allowing for 'vulnerable groups' to almost automatically signify those diverging from it. Such an understanding of vulnerability as 'different from the norm' easily allows the norm to remain invisible and uncontested. But if vulnerability is seen to characterise us all equally, again the uneven distribution of violence and injury between bodies can be left without adequate attention. What does it mean, to quote Judith Butler (2016: 25), if vulnerability is figured as 'an existential condition', a universal and shared human-animal ontology of us all, or 'a socially induced condition' that characterises some bodies more than others?

Within feminist and queer theory, as well as more broadly in the humanities and social sciences, the interest in vulnerability draws on 'turns' to embodiment, ethics, affect, and ontology (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001; Clough and Halley, 2007; Garber et al., 2000; Koivunen, 2001; 2010). Furthermore, it coincides with what Robyn Wiegman (2014) has termed the reparative 'turn' in queer feminist criticism. However, the history and routes of the concept's travels are much longer and more complex. Invoked in the 1980s in the fields of moral and political philosophy (Goodin, 1985; 1988; Nussbaum, 1986), the concept subsequently travelled across disciplines: from sociology and social policy studies (McLaughlin, 2012; Misztal, 2011; Turner, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009) to legal theory (Fineman, 2008; 2010; Fineman and Fineman, 2017); from bioethics and other forms of ethics (Straehle, 2016; ten Have, 2016) to environmental and disaster studies (Bankoff, 2001; Clark, 2010); from studies of sexual violence (Bergoffen, 2011; Gilson, 2014; 2016) and feminist philosophy (Anderson, 2003; Butler, 1997a; 2004; 2009; Gilson, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2013) to political theory (Butler et al., 2016), international relations (Beattie and Schick, 2013), and development studies, as well as media studies (Chouliaraki, 2013; Knudsen and Stage, 2015).

For feminist theory, vulnerability is a troubling concept since its connotations with femininity and dependence as well as weakness and victimisation invoke a problematic imaginary (Gilson, 2014; 2016). As Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (2016: 2) argue, 'there is always something both risky and true in claiming that women or other socially disadvantaged groups are especially vulnerable'. Making injustices visible may result in reinforcing gendered assumptions about vulnerability as non-agency. The discourse of vulnerability can support various political agendas, including paternalistic, racist, misogynist, homophobic, and anti-feminist ones.

As a response, feminist scholars theorising care and dependency (Dodds, 2013; Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2013; Vaittinen, 2015) or sexual violence (Bergoffen, 2011; Gilson, 2014; 2016; Honkatukia, 2011) have sought to redefine vulnerability in order to dissociate it from victimhood, passivity, and lack of agency. At the same time, feminists have theorised modes of the relational, embodied subject and redefined autonomy as a critique of liberal individualism and modes of rationality (Anderson, 2003; Hutchings, 2013; Mackenzie, 2014; Nussbaum, 1986; Shildrick, 2002). Furthermore, links with paternalism and discourses of victimisation have been problematised by focusing on vulnerability and resistance as interlinked (Butler et al., 2016: 6), and by rethinking vulnerability as 'productive', as the Swedish research programme 'Engaging Vulnerability',[3] funded by the Swedish Research Council for a full decade, suggests. Similarly, vulnerability has been seen to generate feminist research ethics, when 'receptivity' is practised as a way of remaining open for change as a scholar (Page, 2017). Erinn Gilson (2016) argues that vulnerability as a concept is 'of special value because of how it captures and expresses the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of experiences of gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary life'.

While redefining vulnerability has been one key feminist strategy, some scholars such as Judith Butler (2016) have expressed doubt over whether the concept can be productive or should be used at all in some contexts. In Butler's (2016: 25) words, undoing the binary between vulnerability and resistance is a feminist task, but 'vulnerability cannot be the basis of group identification without strengthening paternalistic power'. She further critiques human rights discourse and legal regimes for ignoring 'modes of political agency and resistance within so-called vulnerable populations', seeing them instead as in need of institutional or state protection and advocacy (Butler, 2016: 24–5). On the other hand, feminist scholars such as Alyson Cole (2016) have critiqued the move to redefine vulnerability in contradistinction to victimisation, since if victims are not seen as victims this may inadvertently feed into politics which does not prioritise changing injustices. Cole suggests, furthermore, that there needs to be a clear distinction between those that are *injurable* and those who are already injured.

Expectedly, many feminist, queer, and critical race studies scholars have turned to other or nearby concepts instead of vulnerability to address the tensions between injury and power. Butler herself has, for example, preferred the concept of *precariousness* in other contexts (2004). Precariousness, for her, refers to the way in which all lives 'can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed' (2004: 12). In this sense, precariousness, just like vulnerability, refers to the ontological fragility of life. But the contexts in which Butler discusses preciousness are more intimately linked to the possibility of death, disappearance, diminishing, or perishing

of life: America's post-9/11 war on terror; Palestinian deaths; the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Vulnerability seems to thus refer more to the possibility or risk of injury – people and non-human actors can still persist indefinitely as vulnerable – whereas precariousness refers to a more imminent threat of perishing, even if the two concepts can at times be used interchangeably.

Moreover, vulnerability can sometimes resemble a synonym of *marginalisation* or *subordination*, especially when it is invoked in connection to those who suffer or experience discrimination due to how they are categorised: vulnerable groups are then usually also marginalised groups. But, despite their close allegiance, marginalisation and subordination invoke first and foremost structures and societal conditions that produce injustice and political action. Their existence does not depend as much on lived experiences – feeling discriminated against is not the same as being discriminated against – and is not necessarily as keenly connected to embodiment and corporeal fragility as is vulnerability. Perhaps most importantly for this book, however, vulnerability directly invokes and mobilises affect in that it actualises in feelings of fear, shame, compassion, anger, and many others, whereas marginalisation and subordination, while often involving a deeply affective dimension, can at least seemingly exist and thrive passionlessly, invisibly, and normalised.

Another, and perhaps less obvious, concept we see as intimately tied to vulnerability is *abjection*. This connection only becomes feasible when vulnerability is understood, not as an intrinsic quality of any group or a 'weakness', but as a tension between subjugation and resistance, embedded both in societal and psychic structures. Imogen Tyler (2013), drawing on French psychoanalytical feminist theorist Julia Kristeva's (1982) work, discusses what she calls social abjection in reference to groups such as Roma and asylum seekers, often deemed disposable or 'scum' from the perspective of dominant or state power, but who still resist, revolt, and fight against their subjugation. Tyler points out, however, that the demands for justice, equality, and recognition by such revolting subjects ('revolting' as in both deemed abject and involved in acts of revolt) can lead and have led to further cycles of punishment (2013: 12). A similar fear surrounds the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo campaigns discussed earlier, where the demands to recognise and end killing and harassment may also lead to even keener silencing and even more violence. Darieck Scott, in his work on blackness, abjection, and power, argues that there is counterintuitive power in abjection, particularly when it comes to black bodies which are often used as 'one of the go-to-figures for referencing abject' (2010: 12). Scott suggests that instead of trying to change past traumatic and painful narratives, images, and experiences of black abjection into ones of black heroism or

success, such abjection, trauma, and psychic disintegration could be used as a resource for the political present (2010: 6). While abjection and vulnerability do in some ways approach each other – both are keenly connected to affect and embodiment – abjection nevertheless implies disgust, shame, and fear to a wholly different degree than vulnerability, which does not necessarily have anything to do with disgust but comes up perhaps most often in relation to compassion (as discussed later).

It is indeed worth asking how productive the approach to vulnerability – or abjection – as simultaneously involving resistance can be when addressing issues like global racism and massive inequalities in basic resources and the ability to live on. What resistance could there possibly be in the utmost realisation of vulnerability – death? Ruth Wilson Gilmore's well-known definition of racism raises this question, as she describes racism as 'the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (2006: 28). For Gilmore, the very group identity of racialised subjects – those subject to racism – is defined through vulnerability to too-early death. The word vulnerability carries particular political weight here: the existence of state-sanctioned and societal racism cannot be negated through pointing out that not all who suffer from racist discrimination die early, but implicating death in the very definition of racism stresses the gravity of its past and present. What is at stake is not only a politics of offence or 'hurt feelings' but questions of life and death.

Black and critical race theorists such as Achille Mbembe have, in a similar vein, conceptualised death as the very heart of contemporary racism, but also as central to societal and political power more broadly, and thus also, unavoidably, resistance. In his writing on the notion of necropolitics, Mbembe suggests that instead of biopower – power managing bodies and life – today we should rather talk about necropower, technologies of managing and 'subjugating life to the power of death' (2003: 39). Mbembe connects this to the increased instrumentalisation of death in the current world politics of terror, where some bodies are allowed to live, some are regarded as disposable, and some are reduced to a twilight between life and death, existing in so-called death-worlds. However, according to Mbembe we become human subjects through the very confrontation with death, and in necropolitics resistance can also take the form of death in acts and practices like sacrifice, suicide, and martyrdom. Following Mbembe's lead in the edited collection *Queer Necropolitics* (2014), Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco set out to explore 'queer subjects invited into life and queerly abjected populations marked for death' (2014: 2), not only in war zones or 'death-worlds' but also in mundane, everyday homonationalist (Puar, 2007) practices where queer can just as well be about

deadly exclusion as about deadly inclusion in relation to the nation state. Again, practices of resistance cannot, under such conditions, exist as the opposite to or negation of vulnerability, pain, or even death, but they build on it and draw affective force from it, just like in the previously discussed #BlackLivesMatter campaigning. These are themes discussed in this book, especially by Ylva Habel, who interrogates Swedish debates on anti-black racist representations through the lens of afro-pessimist theory.

The double edge of vulnerability – its connections to regulation, subjugation, and death on one hand, and its power to bring together and mobilise political agency on the other – has indeed been keenly examined in queer theorising. While scholars interrogating racism and global necropolitics have tended to focus more on vulnerability as connected to structural oppression and state-sanctioned violence, in much queer theorising the need to reclaim and redefine vulnerability as a resource has been at the fore, for example in relation to vulnerable 'femmebodiment' (Dahl, 2017) and queer vulnerability in films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) (Hagelin, 2013: 103–18). Ann Cvetkovich, in her exploration of the role of trauma and vulnerability in lesbian and queer public cultures, argues for the healing power of vulnerability in working through sexual stigma and violence. For her, sexuality and sex are areas which necessarily make the body vulnerable, but where that vulnerability also offers profoundly transformative vistas for political and personal agency. Examining practices, memories, and documentation of butch-femme sexualities and AIDS activism, among others, Cvetkovich suggests that the power of queer vulnerability lies in openness to pleasure and care as well as injury (2003: 66–7, 202–4).

In queer disability studies, or crip theory, the double edge and potential of embracing vulnerability have long been key to the project of resignifying and redefining disability, alongside able-bodiedness. Feminist and queer disability scholars and activists have thoroughly questioned the normalised association of disability to corporeal weakness and external regulation, critiquing the ideology of 'compulsory able-bodiedness' (McRuer, 2006). They have also suggested that the vulnerabilities of the disabled body are central and potentially destabilising to the very ideas of bodily and sexual normalcy (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Shildrick, 2002). Crip theorists such as Alison Kafer (2013) have nevertheless argued that feminist disability studies' emphasis on the social constructedness of disability and the revolutionary potential of vulnerability may disregard some important material aspects of disability. For Kafer, the very real experiences of pain, exhaustion, and weakness risk becoming taboos, and some disabled people's need for care and medical intervention risks becoming depoliticised if vulnerability is only perceived as a resource for revolt and destabilising norms.

Feminist, queer, and critical race studies scholarship on and related to vulnerability spans not only a plethora of identities, issues, and locations, but is also characterised by multiplicity and complex interlacing in terms of theoretical backgrounds and investments. Keeping in mind that in the work of many (if not most) scholars various legacies flow into each other, we can identify at least four different critical legacies contributing to theorising vulnerability across feminist scholarship as well as queer and critical race studies:

1   A phenomenological understanding of vulnerability as an ontological condition of the embodied subject (Ahmed, 2004; 2006; Butler, 2004; 2009; Cavarero, 2009; Grosz, 1994; 2008; Shildrick, 2002).
2   A psychoanalytically informed understanding of vulnerability as an effect of psychic or social trauma (Butler, 1997b; 2004; 2005; Cvetkovich, 2003; Kristeva, 2010; Oliver, 2007; Scott, 2010).
3   A new materialist notion of vulnerability as an effect of bio-technologies and material transformability (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; Braidotti, 2006; Colebrook, 2010; Fraser et al., 2005; Kafer, 2013; Mbembe, 2003, Puar, 2007; Shildrick, 2002; Smelik and Lykke, 2008).
4   A critical theory notion of vulnerability as a particular politically produced condition and a historically specific political language (Ahmed, 2004; 2017; Berlant, 1997; 2008; Brown, 1995; 2008; Butler, 1997a; Skeggs, 2005).

These legacies of theorising also appear in studies of media, particularly of how media culture shapes subjectivities, bodies, identities, and politics. Vulnerability in this disciplinary context emerges in different theories of thinking about media 'effects', or how we function in a highly mediatised culture through various dependencies and forms of agency. In the forefront of media theoretical uses of vulnerability are phenomenological theories investigating the interlacing of embodiment and consciousness with media technologies, 'vision in the flesh', and the interconnectedness of senses (Sobchack, 2004), as well as 'haptic viewing', corporeal openness to and of film, and touch as a mode of engaging with media (Marks, 2000).

The psychoanalytical understanding of vulnerability, on the other hand, has informed feminist film theorists ever since the 1970s, as they have investigated how our gendered subjectivities are formed through affective engagements with screen images on a deep psychosocial level (de Lauretis, 1984; 1994; Silverman, 1996; Stacey, 2010; White, 1999). What is particularly interesting about psychoanalytical feminist film theories is that they have understood our susceptibility to and longing for pleasure as being our greatest vulnerability in the face of patriarchal structures of

domination: pleasure makes us unwittingly submit to power. In comparison to today, as Kyrölä discusses in her chapter on trigger warning debates, it seems that, rather than pleasure, feelings of discomfort or anxiety are considered much more suspicious and signalling subordination.

Third, new materialist notions of engagements with media as 'wiring', 'effect', or corporeal 'becoming' through images and technologies have become more and more influential in feminist, queer, and critical race studies' theorising of and around media (Coleman, 2008; Keeling, 2007; MacCormack, 2008; Parisi and Terranova, 2001). Finally, the critical theory notion of vulnerability concretises in investigations of media engagement as a form of political agency and a site of citizenship, or becoming intelligible as a subject (Berlant, 1997; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Rancière, 2009; Skeggs, 2005). In the book at hand, this last strand of theorising is perhaps most prominent, although, as always, a strict distinction is impossible, and convergence inevitable.

Several of the four legacies or traditions of theorising we sketched above also merge in Judith Butler's work on vulnerability, which thoroughly informs our approach. Butler's long engagement with the concept has ranged from the discussion of hate speech and linguistic vulnerability in *Excitable Speech* (1997a), which links most clearly to the psychoanalytical and critical theory understandings, to theorising vulnerability as a form of activism in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2005) and as resistance in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016), which lean more towards a collation of phenomenological and critical theory understandings. Writing about violence and mourning in *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler defines vulnerability as an existential condition of us all in the phenomenological sense: 'a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt' (2004: 29). She argues for 'a common human vulnerability', 'a condition of primary vulnerability', and 'fundamental modes of dependency' (2004: 31, 49), going against an understanding of vulnerability as deprivation or absence of agency. However, 'there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe' (2004: 32). In Butler's analysis, vulnerability is to be discussed in relation to power, norms, and recognition, even if there is an existential dimension to it as well. Recognition is key for Butler in shifting vulnerability from universal co-dependency towards political mobilisation: 'vulnerability takes on another meaning at the moment it is recognised, and recognition wields the power to reconstitute vulnerability' (2004: 43).

Later, in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable*, Butler stresses the agency of the vulnerable body, stating that 'there are no invulnerable bodies' (2009: 25–6). While 'injury is one thing that can and does happen', the

body's vulnerability is not reducible to its injurability. The responsiveness of the body 'may include a wide range of affects: pleasure, rage, suffering, hope, to name a few' (Butler, 2004: 34). Most recently, in the edited collection *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Butler further develops her characteristic idea of vulnerability as both a restraint and a potentiality, thoroughly interlacing the phenomenological, psychoanalytical, and political/critical theory understandings. Vulnerability, importantly, is not a subjective disposition for Butler, but 'a relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way' (Butler, 2016: 25).

For the purposes of this book, the notion of vulnerability (and invulnerability) as 'politically produced, unequally distributed through and by different operations of power' (Butler et al., 2016: 5) offers a productive starting point. Recognising the importance of how vulnerability can enable the norm to remain intact, this approach simultaneously resists equating the power of vulnerability with identity politics or reducing it to a 'politics of pain'. The pull of the neoliberal, individualistic narrative of 'from vulnerability to resilience' is forceful both in feminist academic discussions and contemporary public discussions and media cultures. However, in this book we want to follow up on Butler's call for understanding vulnerability as restraint as well as responsiveness, a concept rife with paradoxes, but also potential.

Furthermore, we want to stress vulnerability's contextuality and explore how exactly injury and agency, pain and power, work together when vulnerability is mobilised in the public imagination, in mediated debates, and cultural policies. Our purpose is not to argue *for* vulnerability as the best or extraordinarily useful concept or tool for critical research, nor *against* vulnerability as a concept or a starting point for activist efforts. Rather, we approach vulnerability both as a concept and a political language, offering analyses of its histories, legacies, power, and potential as well as problems in the wider social and political contexts where it has today been mobilised. What does this language do? How does the same language have many different functions in various contexts? What are the implications of conceptualising vulnerability as a basis for or a restraint to political agency, identity politics, and claims-making?

VULNERABILITY AS A POLITICAL LANGUAGE

In practical and policy work that aims to advance equality, social protection, and human rights, the concept of vulnerability is well-established today. In particular, it is used in reference to 'vulnerable populations' or 'groups' – those that embody difference from the normative subject. In

the human rights discourse, the notion of 'vulnerable populations' has been used in order to advocate for special protection or awareness of marginalised, disadvantaged, and discriminated groups, such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ people, vulnerable to violations of their fundamental rights. 'Vulnerable populations' have been established in human rights discourse by the Council of Europe, the European Union, the European Court of Justice, and the European Court of Human Rights (Ippolito and Sanchez, 2015; Masferrer and Garcia-Sánchez, 2016; Peroni and Timmer, 2013), and notions of vulnerable persons or groups abound in policy documents (in the UK since the 1990s – see McLaughlin, 2012). Moreover, the notion has been institutionalised in policy documents concerning research ethics since 1979 (National Commission, 1979). 'Vulnerable groups' and 'populations' are also used by the World Health Organization, in refugee and asylum policies, and in handbooks for disaster preparedness and prevention.

In queer, feminist, and critical race studies discussions, the politics of claiming rights has been broadly problematised since rights imply a certain allegiance to the nation state or other global governing bodies which can themselves be seen as agents of colonialist, patriarchal, and heteronormative power and violence (e.g. Brown, 1995; Haritaworn et al., 2014; Puar, 2007). In particular, indigenous feminist theorists have been at the forefront of pointing out how the notion of the nation state itself builds on heteronormative, capitalist, and settler-colonialist ideas about modernity and civilisation, as well as land and nature as something that can be owned, bought, sold, and separated from human and non-human beings that live in it (Arvin et al., 2013; Simpson, 2014). Even if the language of human rights and its emphasis on the inviolability of human dignity is meant to protect and preserve all on an equal basis, this aim is often far from becoming realised. The political language of rights, just like the political language of vulnerability, can be and has been decontextualised, recontextualised, mobilised, circulated, appropriated, and misappropriated.

The chapters in this book address four aspects of how the political language of vulnerability operates: (1) as a human rights discourse (Horak, Gondouin et al.); (2) as a language easily appropriated by dominant groups (Paasonen, Habel, Gondouin et al.); (3) as a contested language invoking long-running debates in queer, feminist, and anti-racist media cultures (Halberstam, Ahmed, Kyrölä); and (4) as a language translated into cultural policymaking and imaginary in a specific national context (Brunow, Ryberg, Lee Gerdén, Koivunen). Chapters by Laura Horak and Johanna Gondouin et al. provide original perspectives on the mobilisation of vulnerability in the contexts of trans activism and in the debate about transnational commercial surrogacy – contexts where the rights to safety, life, and self-determination are highly acute. Horak discusses two documentaries about

translatina world-making – *The Salt Mines* (US, Susana Aikin and Carlos Aparicio, 1990) and *Wildness* (US, Wu Tsang, 2012) – arguing that both offer respectful reflections on the possibilities and dangers of representing vulnerable trans lives. Gondouin et al.'s chapter on the TV series *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (Australia, Jane Campion, 2017) sheds light on the conflicting discourses of reproductive rights and reproductive justice, and how white and non-white vulnerabilities carry different affective weights in popular narratives about transnational commercial surrogacy.

In addition to the human rights discourse on vulnerability as an issue of structural differences between groups and exposure to risks, the proliferation of the language of vulnerability is also evident in the broad contemporary Western concerns about the fate of humankind in the midst of economic polarisation and insecurity, global terrorism, the rise of right-wing nationalism, fast technological development, artificial intelligence, the mass extinction of species, climate change, and the Anthropocene (Haraway, 2016). This general sense of being/becoming vulnerable is amplified by social media, for instance by the Facebook safety check on occasion of various attacks, emergencies, and disasters, which is critiqued for its Western bias (McHugh, 2015).

Such broad concerns make up a narrative of hovering threats and human defencelessness. In the 2010s, the evident currency of the concept of vulnerability has been attributed to the way it epitomises 'a new sense of risk' (Misztal, 2011) or even a Zeitgeist in the twenty-first century. What seems to matter in such Western narratives is a *feeling of vulnerability* and its anticipation, rather than experiences of violence, hurt, trauma, illness, or oppression. Vulnerability becomes, then, temporally organised through expectation and prevention, as an orientation towards a threatening and dangerous future, invoking what Cole (2016) has called blurred boundaries between those who are injurable and those already injured. In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed (2004) asks who is contained through terror and whose vulnerability is at stake, while analysing fear and anxiety around terrorism in Western countries after 9/11. Ahmed demonstrates how narratives of crisis and being under threat by imagined others justify the racial profiling, border policing, surveillance, and detention of any bodies suspected of being terrorists.

In the contemporary American and European social and cultural imaginary, the positions of being 'under attack' or 'threatened' are advocated by dominant groups, such as white men involved in men's rights activism, or anti-immigration and nationalist movements. In these contexts, vulnerability appears as 'a tactical field' of making claims (Butler et al., 2016: 4–5). The power of vulnerability in this imaginary became acutely apparent when the Trump administration made an alleged attempt to ban a list of

words, including 'transgender', 'diversity', and 'vulnerable', from being used in health policies in December 2017. In a comment, Jack Halberstam (2017) proposes that the alleged ban on words addressing marginalised groups suggests to Trump's white male voter base that 'certain people are getting special entitlements' and that 'social justice measures are … going to be detrimental to your welfare, your economic well-being, your health and so on'. Similarly, Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016: 135ff.) describes the deeply felt anger of white people in the Tea Party movement who feel that others are 'cutting the line' with governmental support. The case of Trump's word ban also makes apparent that the language of vulnerability does not only regard a competition for attention or a politics of recognition, but also a redistribution of resources and access to healthcare (Butler, 1997c; Fraser, 1997; Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

In the wake of Brexit (the UK's decision to leave the European Union), the 2016 US presidential election resulting in Donald Trump's election, and the rise of European populism, narratives of wounded nations, genders, and classes permeate news and other journalism. As a political language articulating a felt experience of our time, vulnerability is then also oriented towards the past and a sense of disappointment, betrayal (Hochschild, 2016), and distrust, and of having invested in a narrative that did not keep its promise (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). In contemporary popular culture, such emotions are often channelled through recycled and updated versions of the figure of the sad white man or white men in crisis (Faludi, 1999), prompting calls for empathy and compassion, and recognition of white men's vulnerability (Hagelin, 2013). Susanna Paasonen's chapter in this book discusses the figure of the vulnerable white man in its recent incarnation in the hugely popular novels and films about the wealthy yet emotionally broken white straight man Christian Grey in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise. White heterosexual male vulnerability constituted in childhood trauma not only humanises the cold and sadistic Christian, but also functions as a social and sexual fantasy, Paasonen shows. The chapter examines the notion of vulnerability as it smooths over outrageous structural privilege.

Fifty Shade of Grey, however, is only one of many examples in contemporary popular culture that lift up, offer attention to, and dry the tears of white straight men represented as wounded. In a blog post on the widely celebrated melodrama *Manchester by the Sea* (US, Kenneth Lonergan, 2016), Jack Halberstam (2017) reads the film as symptomatic of the Trumpian Zeitgeist and critiques the affective politics of the film. The viewers' compassion is first and foremost channelled towards the male protagonist played by Casey Affleck, who won an Oscar for his performance of a grief-stricken janitor – not his wife who also mourns, or his kids who were killed in the film because of his negligence. Halberstam argues: 'Whiteness, the

film tells us, is part of the frayed beauty of America and its power hangs in the balance in a world where bad things can and do happen to white men … even when they themselves cause those bad things to happen!' Summarising the film's politics, Halberstam concludes: 'It is time, apparently to make America great again, to cater to the sad white man, to feel his pain, to lift him up and dry his tears' (Halberstam, 2017; see also Serisier, 2008).

In neoliberal media culture, traumatic first-person or group narratives have popular currency, suggesting a possibility to mobilise experiences of trauma to gain both cultural visibility and political advantage. The politics of representation translates into a question about whose vulnerability counts as socially and culturally legible, acknowledged, and deserving of compassion. In the age of commodified trauma narratives, a rhetoric of vulnerability may look like a competition between disadvantaged groups. Vulnerability becomes a kind of capital, a resource, or an asset, making its way into public discourse. In this book, Habel analyses how vulnerability becomes a resource and tool for white privilege in the context of public debates on racist representation in Sweden. Drawing on the work of afro-pessimist scholars and discussing the controversy around the children's film *Liten skär och alla små brokiga* [*Little Pink and the Motley Crew*] (Stina Wirsén, Sweden, 2012), Habel elucidates how blackness in Swedish mainstream media debates became an unfathomable 'object' as white media commentators and gatekeepers forcefully played out a sense of white fragility in response to the critique of the film's racial stereotypes. Gondouin et al. demonstrate in their chapter how the series *Top of the Lake: China Girl* invokes a notion of reproductive vulnerability that justifies the practice of transnational commercial surrogacy, obscures intersectional asymmetries of power, and overrides concerns for the precarious situation of surrogates in the Global South – all through an overemphasis on the emotional fragility of white couples who long for babies.

As a language so easily whitewashed and adopted both by normative legal structures and dominant groups in the public debate, the political usefulness of vulnerability as a key term in queer, feminist, and anti-racist activism has been questioned. In this book, Kyrölä's, Ahmed's, and Halberstam's chapters all engage vulnerability as a contested tool associated with identity politics as well as with its critique. Their chapters address the heavily debated issue of trigger warnings as a question in academic classrooms, activism, the blogosphere, and online forums from the United States to the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries. Kyrölä's chapter offers an analysis of how varying understandings of vulnerability are mobilised in three different contexts where the figure of the trigger warning currently circulates: in feminist online discussion forums; in the feminist, queer, and anti-racist academic opposition of trigger warnings;

and in anti-feminist public discourses. Halberstam's chapter – reprinted from the feminist journal *Signs* winter 2017 issue, accompanied by a digital archive on trigger warnings – discusses requests for trigger warnings on US college campuses as conforming to paternalistic and normative structures of protection and surveillance. Ahmed's chapter – also a reprint from a post on her blog 'Feminst Killjoys' – discusses how the trigger warning debate circulates a figure of 'the too-easily-hurt student' that reactivates old notions of women's studies as encouraging hyper-sensitivity and narcissistic quests for individual self-realisation.

As seen in the debate on trigger warnings, the language of vulnerability evokes the problem of 'wounded attachments' as the by-product of emancipatory identity politics grounded in 'logics of pain' (Brown, 1995), but the same language also raises questions about the uses and meanings of representations of violence, abuse, suffering, and pain. Celebrated films and TV series such as *Precious* (US, Lee Daniels, 2009), *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (US, Benh Zeitlin, 2012), and *Orange Is the New Black* (US, Jenji Kohan, 2013–) have been much criticised for the ways in which aestheticised and extensive depictions of black suffering turn into a fetishising spectacle and 'Black misery porn' (Griffin, 2014). At the same time, the ethical responsibilities of news and other media coverage of human despair and death in the contexts of natural disasters and war, such as the devastating hurricane in Haiti in 2016 and the Syrian war and refugee crisis, are being intensely debated (Chouliaraki, 2013; Durham, 2018; Knudsen and Stage, 2015). In this book, chapters by Lee Gerdén, Habel, and Gondouin et al. address aspects of how black and brown bodies come to be represented as less sensitive to humiliation and pain than white bodies, less vulnerable or grievable, or less worthy of ethical tactfulness. Horak's chapter draws attention to the complex problem of how increased media visibility and attention to discrimination and hate crimes against trans people have, instead of decreasing risks, resulted in increased violence, particularly against poor and immigrant trans women of colour and sex-workers as easily accessible targets.

As Berlant argues, scenes of vulnerability that are expected to invite connection, sympathy, and engagement often produce 'a desire to withhold compassionate attachment' instead:

> the aesthetic and political spectacle of suffering vulnerability seems to bring out something terrible, a drive not to feel compassion or sympathy, an aversion to a moral claim on the spectator to engage, when all the spectator wants to do is to turn away quickly and harshly. (Berlant, 2004: 9–10)

In Berlant's analysis, hence, 'we must be compelled to feel right, to overcome our aversions to others' suffering by training ourselves in compassionate

practice' (Berlant, 2004: 11). In other words, the ethical claim to do what is right is increasingly replaced with the urge to feel right – and feeling right can easily become an empty, passing gesture designed to only barely mask one's urge to look away. In 'the humanitarian imaginary', the mediation of vulnerability and modes of soliciting compassion have thus changed. Whereas raising awareness for the suffering of others has been regarded 'a catalyst for the cosmopolitanization of solidarity', as Lilien Chouliaraki (2013) has argued, the proliferation of mediatised stories about vulnerable others has been criticised for leading to 'general suspicion or even apathy among media publics'. In the age of 'post-humanitarianism', furthermore, the spectators are less oriented towards the suffering of others than they are towards themselves.

On the other hand, the language of vulnerability has the capacity to invoke social formations that Berlant has termed 'intimate publics': 'affective scene[s] of identification among strangers' that promise 'a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x' (2008). As collectives of individuals who have survived and are 'marked by the historical burden of being harshly treated in a generic way', intimate publics are 'juxtapolitical', according to Berlant. They attach people to each other, not by engaging dominant political institutions but through a shared sense of a 'common emotional world', 'an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates *relief from the political*' (Berlant, 2008: 10). The #MeToo campaign and most notably Oprah Winfrey's speech about surviving sexual abuse at the Golden Globe Awards ceremony in January 2018 – with the ensuing rumours and urges for her to run for president in 2020 – call into question the distinction between intimate publics and the political sphere. The figure of the survivor, prominent in Winfrey's speech as well as the #MeToo campaign, has for some decades been gaining visibility in queer, feminist, and anti-racist activism and media cultures (e.g. Cvetkovich, 2003). While the language of survival underlines the severity of the physical and psychological pain that sexual abuse, rape, and homophobic and racist aggression bring about, and how everyone does not survive that violence, it can also raise issues about when and how the figure of the survivor is taken up. When does 'survivorship' connote a struggle to survive in the face of oppressive violence, and when does it invoke yet another narrative of heroism in the face of almost insurmountable adversity? In this book, the issue of surviving sexual and/or racialised abuse is addressed particularly in Ahmed's, Habel's, and Horak's chapters which discuss the hurt, the anger, and the things that survival can require for marginalised subjects.

Overall, the book is divided into three parts, each with a distinctive approach to the power of vulnerability. The opening part focuses on the notion of vulnerability as a battleground in queer, feminist, and anti-racist

discussions. Part II examines the potential and limits of the language of vulnerability, illuminating how affect and vulnerability have turned into a politicised currency for not only addressing but also obscuring asymmetries of power. Part III focuses on complex intersections between media activism and state policies addressing so-called vulnerable groups. This part specifically explores Sweden as a context where feminist, queer, and anti-racist activism meets progressive public policies of gender, sexual equality, and cultural diversity.

As a political language, vulnerability is not only institutionalised in human rights, social protection, and healthcare discourses but also in cultural policymaking, having a concrete impact on how resources for cultural production are distributed. This is abundantly evident in Sweden, where an increased interplay between feminist, queer, and anti-racist activism, and presumably progressive public policies of gender, sexual equality, and cultural diversity, has taken place in recent years. This has in part resulted in acclaim, in part in failure to achieve the desired effects, and in part in furious attacks from those who see particular measures to lift up underrepresented groups as a threat to the artistic freedom of others. To the latter group, such measures function as proof of how identity politics have overrun concerns about quality, a theme Mara Lee Gerdén interrogates in her chapter. In several of these debates, the Swedish Film Institute takes centre stage, also attracting much international attention. The current CEO Anna Serner has, since launching a programme for gender equality in Swedish cinema in 2013, held seminars at several top-tier film festivals and inspired policy-making within the British Film Institute and Eurimages.[4] In the midst of the #MeToo campaign, Serner announced that the institute would launch an education programme about sexual harassment, mandatory for all production companies seeking its support (Keslassy, 2017).

Against the extraordinary institutionalisation of feminist, LGBTQ, and 'diversity' perspectives in the Swedish context, this book offers a selection of original, detailed analyses of how vulnerability is set in motion in Swedish cultural policymaking, focusing particularly on the Swedish Film Institute. Chapters by Lee Gerdén, Brunow, and Ryberg investigate the political potential and constraints of the language of vulnerability for feminist, queer, and anti-racist thought and media activism, as they become institutionalised in public policies. Lee Gerdén's chapter looks at a recent Swedish Film Institute research programme on developing anti-racist and feminist film projects, asking how the programme allowed for hurtful histories to be articulated, and racial identity and 'racialised emotions' to be embraced as creative and empowering tools – but how, at the same time, the programme completely failed in listening to the voices of women of colour artists. Brunow's chapter investigates the management of queer-related

content by the national audio-visual archives in Sweden and the UK as well as in activist archives, asking how practices of curating, cataloguing, and adding metadata have significance for whose lives, stories, and images can be remembered. Ryberg discusses the interplay between lesbian feminist filmmaking and Swedish policies on sexuality in the 1970s, making visible how lesbian self-presentation and citizenship emerged through discourses of vulnerability, such as abortion and contraception policies. In the same part, Anu Koivunen's chapter focuses on how the popular Swedish TV series and a trilogy of novels *Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar* [*Don't Ever Wipe Tears Without Gloves*] (2012), as well as the publicity around them, turned the previously unspoken trauma of AIDS and the deaths of gay men into a reparative fantasy and a resource for renewing the national self-image.

All in all, this edited collection brings together sets of media material from a variety of cultural contexts, shedding light on some of the burning issues at stake in contemporary media and cultural debates. The focus is particularly on analysing representations – from television series (Koivunen) to films (Paasonen, Ryberg, Gondouin et al., Horak), and from newspapers to online debates (Halberstam, Kyrölä, Habel) – but also on practices of archiving, remembering, and developing media content (Brunow, Lee Gerdén). Through these contexts, the chapters interrogate vulnerability as complex power relations forged through the circulation of mediatised affect, and thus they also offer a novel perspective on the recent scholarly debates on affect theories and affective methodologies. Every chapter, in its own way, questions and complicates the common narrative of our time as being too valorising about, occupied with, or fearful of vulnerability, by examining how the processes of naming and framing people or groups as vulnerable is always already highly politicised. There can be no set thing that vulnerability does or is, but the efficacy of vulnerability as a political language is fundamentally dependent on the contexts in which it is used.

As we have argued, nor is there a field of 'vulnerability studies', but the current popularity of the concept draws its power rather from its rich and varied legacies. However, there is no telling what vulnerability will do or where it will go in the future, since the language of vulnerability is clearly in motion, given the developments we have outlined above. Will vulnerability become increasingly domesticated, appropriated by dominant groups, and institutionalised as lip service that covers over continued marginalisation, like many argue has happened to the once-revolutionary concept of intersectionality (Bilge, 2013)? It remains to be seen where the language of vulnerability will go, but the urgent questions of power and powerlessness that it currently attempts to address are not likely to vanish anytime soon.

NOTES

1 The social media campaign and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter should be seen as partially separate from the movement Black Lives Matter, although they overlap in multiple ways (Freelon et al., 2016: 9).
2 Vulnerability studies has, however, on occasion been named as a field, both in terms of establishing such a field (Fineman et al., 2012) and critiquing it (Cole, 2016).
3 See www.engagingvulnerability.se (accessed 4 March 2018).
4 The cultural support fund of the Council of Europe, which provides funding for European cooperation at various levels of film culture.

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