

BEYOND RESILIENCE: RECLAIMING “THE GLINTS OF EMOTIONS UNDER EMERGENCIES”

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The restrictive measures taken in the late Winter of 2020 against Covid-19 confined many citizens worldwide, as Ralph Savarese’s poem intimates, “under one roof.” Stringing together wild metaphors, the poem punningly evokes many of the major concerns we experienced during the pandemic (anxiety, fragility, medicalization, loss), even as it puts pressure on what for many is its most controversial and oppressive restriction. Covid lockdowns are more readily associated with isolation and social distancing—“no contact outside your bubble!”—but here Savarese centers what, in the preface to *When This Is Over* (2020), his collection of ‘pandemic poems,’ he calls the “pressure of proximity” (xiii). Such proximity is first and foremost spatial: Yes, we were isolated, but also forced, together, into sharing a common, often “smallish[,] living room” (xiv). In this literal sense, Savarese’s “Roof” refers, of course, to the household, but it also wryly alludes to that “one Nation”—that paternalistic political power, that is, bent on providing protection to its most vulnerable citizens, while at the same time enacting neoliberal policies of care that end up making the individual responsible for their own well-being. Nonetheless, the poem insistently yet subtly asks, can one roof (domestic or public) really protect us? Is the household (or, the Nation) really a safe space?

The roof can also be read figuratively, and the proximity as spiritual or psychological. In this sense, being under one roof stands for being in the same boat, as it were, and the poem ostensibly chronicles a commonly shared tragedy—that looming catastrophe or “hell” to which we all go together, in a “heartbasket,” as Savarese playfully

puts it. Yet, what about all the personal tragedies—the “small harms” and “minor digs,” the political bickering, the lonelinesses and lost years—the poem touches upon? The significance of proximity thus expands and proliferates—under one roof all of us had to come into close contact or intimacy with our own vulnerabilities (both shared and unique); under one roof, the space between the domestic and the public sphere, between the personal and the communal, collapses.

In the aftermath of the first wave of the pandemic, US novelist Jesmyn Ward similarly delved into the implications of such collapse or proximity, creating a narrative of loss and mourning that explores how individual and global tragedies may intersect and overlap. In “On Witness and Repair,” she intertwines the events of the global health crisis with those of the protests following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, as both unfolded around her own grief for the death of her beloved husband. To be clear, our interest in these (lyrical) meditations on the pandemic rests not on the health crisis itself but rather, to use Savarese’s (2020) words again, on the “sense of urgency” (xiii) that the pandemic brought about—the imperative, that is, to tend to personal affectivities, sufferings, debilities that often remain subdued in times of global catastrophe, overpowered by the more pressing (so the official narrative goes) communal ailments. In Ward and Savarese, as well as in the activists of the BLM movement, we recognize an unabashed readiness to embrace vulnerability and fragility as instruments of testimony, action, resistance—a shared consciousness through which “to amplify the voices of the dead who sing to [us]” (Ward 2020). Indeed, since the personal can be political in powerful ways, in a society which enforces, either directly or indirectly, not only the right to kill certain citizens, but also the “right to maim” (Puar 2016), debility may represent a political stance, and vulnerability “one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance” (Butler et al. 2016, 1).

An unprecedented global traumatic event, the Covid-19 pandemic turned the spotlight on human physical and psychological fragility. And human fragility seems to be crucial to fully grasp phenomena like the rekindling of the Black Lives Matter movement and its expansion worldwide, in alliance with other movements that denounce the oppression of peoples of color all around the globe; the invasion of and

War in Ukraine and its political and socio-economic implications; the impact of climate related natural disasters (droughts, heatwaves, floodings)—all present-day global tragedies that point to the personal suffering beneath. By putting vulnerability, debility, fragility at the center of this special issue, however, we do not wish to view them as merely negative conditions or affects—we do not wish to use a syntax of pity. Our main interest is indeed to consider their generative potential: how may the debilitating, draining effects of adversity turn into strength, resilience, and respair (the return to hope after a period of despair)? How may they foster action, resistance, pride? May we think about vulnerability in a way that refuses victimhood and pity and reclaims agency? Here, however, we run the risk of falling back into ableist narratives of self-improvement and rehabilitation—the return to an accepted definition of health and well-being. May we consider vulnerability generative *in itself*, without it fostering resilience or strength—can we, in other words, move beyond the neoliberal infatuation with resilience and find ways to embrace fragility without stigma or pathologization? To reclaim fragility not as the emblem of a status of inferiority with regard to an assumed “normalcy”—something to be overcome and/or put aside in order to fit in the best of all possible worlds—offers the possibility to see it as a condition that has a creative value of its own. This perspective opens up a different approach to fragility, one that is much needed in a society founded on individualism and on the isolation and the stigmatization of those considered “weak.” The dimension that most characterizes us as living beings is perhaps our finiteness, and fragility in this sense constitutes a founding element of consciousness, one that implies an unexpectedly subversive awareness of both the self and community, which can fuel social change in times of despair—but not only.

The contributions in this special issue work together to draw a map of US fragility that is both thematic, as Laura de la Parra puts forward in her contribution to this issue, as well as conceptual, as suggested by Austin James Bailey’s analysis of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Our contributors look at different variations of fragility in different contexts and geographies: the (medicalized) depression and loneliness fostered by neoliberal practices of care; the woundedness (both symbolic and material) of the female

experience in, by, across the Border; the apparently irresolvable conflict between mutual care and support, and normative masculinity in the military; the imposed (and misrecognized or misrepresented) fragility of black life by a hegemonic public discourse that perpetuates mainstream racial imaginaries as it silences black speech. But fragility emerges also as the very condition of thinking of and expressing the affective flows undergirding that same fragility, debility, vulnerability. The fragility or precariousness, that is, of any discourse that aspires to grasp what can only be described as ungraspable—those corporeal sensations, gut reactions, unparsed emotions that “are felt but defy clear articulation,” to borrow from Bailey, and which constitute our primal relation with the world. While Bailey’s essay revolves quite explicitly around this question, most of our contributors, if less explicitly, also grapple with that conceptual or structural fragility while thinking about the many forms fragility may take: how to effectively address this affective dimension in a cultural terrain where the distinction between mind and body, between rationality and affectivity, still seems to hold?

In her essay, de la Parra focuses on the precarious bodies of US society and on the way in which Claudia Rankine’s lyrical ‘I’ demands recognition for those othered and stigmatized subjects who are excluded even from a national grief, that of 9/11, that should have created a community under the same tragedy. According to de la Parra, Rankine’s interest in the most fragile components of society in a historical moment of national fragility illuminates the possibility to acknowledge the human condition as essentially vulnerable and, perhaps exactly because of this, open to change—economic, political, social, and ultimately communal. Similarly writing about being in/at the margins of US society, Cristina Martín Hernández’s “Reclaiming Wounds: Personal Narratives and Collective Memory in Norma Elía Cantú’s Autobiographical Writing” reads Cantú’s poetry and her “fictional autobioethnography” together as a conversation about women’s autobiographical writing and Chicana feminist subjectivity in the borderlands. In Cantú, Hernández sees the border as both a site of vulnerability and a site of empowerment, a wound that opens on and encompasses both communal and personal grief.

Michael D’Addario continues the conversation by looking at fragility and un/care from within the very institutions that make the United States and focusing on vulnerability and ‘warrior ethos’ among US soldiers and veterans. In “Soldiers Home: Post-Traumatic Stress, Warrior Masculinity, and the (Re)Framing of Care,” D’Addario turns to three literary works—Ernest Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home” (1925), George Saunders’s “Home” (2011), and Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012)—and reads them through the lens of Whitman’s *Drum Taps* and the studies on PTSD in veterans. All these works, D’Addario argues, interrogate the very essence of “normative masculinity,” calling for a change that may enable a different way of providing and receiving care, one that does not equal vulnerability with weakness. Meili Steele’s “Discursive Incarceration: Black Fragility in a Divided Public Sphere” also deals with what can be called institutional normalcy, but brings the focus on how this form of control affects US’ highly-racialized society in a way that prevents radical change. Taking Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (2015) as literary examples of the encounters between black and dominant public spheres, Steele argues that black people have historically been forced to cope with an hegemonic public sphere whose rhetoric of formal equality is no less violent than the physical attacks of other branches of the institutions in enforcing subjugation and dismissing fragility.

Austin J. Bailey and Thomas J. Ferraro join the conversation by intertwining the public and private in two different historical contexts, both emblematic of the way in which US society deals with the politics of crisis and vulnerability. Bailey’s “Gothic’ Ontology and Vital Affect in *The Souls of Black Folk*” provides a reading of W. E. B. Du Bois through William James’s radical empiricism that brings the embodied and affective dimensions of race into critical focus, thus highlighting the various manifestations of fragmentation, precariousness, and ontological fragility that Du Bois’s text deploys and often subverts when addressing racial crisis. Ferraro’s “It’s G-d’s Bloody Rule, Ma” explores the Judaic martyrology in E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, a dimension that sheds light on the novel’s public-as-private narrative of vulnerability and suffering by involving the readers as witnesses of the unfolding implications of Daniel’s “trouble breathing.”

The contributors of this special issue of *JAm It!* explore the creative, generative possibilities of private fragilities in the US present and past. Either as a sign of suffering and grief, or as a valiant fight against adversity, and ultimately as the very measure of our relation with existence, encompassing all that is beyond our control in both the outer and the inner world, vulnerability in its many facets emerges as a fundamental component of the human condition. A component that acquires even more prominence in moments of public or communal grief. Writing after having witnessed the horrors of the Civil War first-hand as a war nurse, Walt Whitman privileged precisely this kind of intimate fragility of “American young and middle aged men,” as they “face death,” and “stand personal anguish and sickness” over the “political interests” involved in the war. “As, in the glints of emotions under emergencies, and the indirect traits and asides in Plutarch,” he wrote, “we get far profounder clues to the antique world than all its more formal history” (Whitman 1982, 778). By paying attention to the “minor scenes and interiors” (ibid.) of everyday American fragilities, our authors are contributing to finding new ways through which, contrary to what the American bard thought, the real war *will* get in the books.

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