

Response

The Terror of Invulnerability

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THE IDEA OF a world without vulnerability is an oddly terrifying prospect. Perhaps ‘prospect’ isn’t quite the right word because politics in colonial modernity has long taken the form of seeking escape from vulnerability in ways that displace it on to others. We might think of the state of nature as a fabled representation of severe and widespread vulnerability in which, prior to the establishment of a social contract, every individual is vulnerable to attack from every other. The establishment of the state, while theoretically eliminating the vulnerability of individuals *vis-à-vis* one another, imposes new vulnerabilities – now to the overweening power of the Leviathan – weakly attenuated by the tenuous liberal promise of ‘rule of law’. Yet the fraying of this social contract under conditions of what has come to be called neoliberal capitalism has hardly returned us to some arcadian utopia. Instead, the secession of the powerful that underpins this fraying – evident in a range of practices such as the privatisation of infrastructure, the purchase of citizenship, the pursuit of tax evasion, the proliferation of walls and fences – might essentially be understood as a quest for invulnerability. This grasping for invulnerability seems to reach its apogee in the techno-optimistic fantasies that attend discussions of our most pressing social problems: witness the robots who will forever eliminate the drudgery of repetitive menial work (but also bring to an end the reliance of capital on the restive working classes), or the geo-engineering solutions that will buy us time to deal with the climate crisis (but also enable the pursuit of limitless growth, or business as usual, in an endless interim). Ventures that present themselves as defying limits in the interests of a common humanity often turn out to redouble the subjection of some to those limits.

A word like ‘secession’ can convey the impression that a politics of invulnerability proceeds primarily through gestures of withdrawal (political, fiscal, and infrastructural abandonment) and separation that extricate those seeking invulnerability from their entanglements with those they believe to have the capacity or desire to harm them. But this provides only a partial view, for such a politics also redirects and intensifies vulnerability. Walls and fences need policing just as much as private

property requires protection and resources demand extraction, necessitating the show and use of force against those who would defy their imperatives. Thus, paradoxically, even as it seeks to extricate itself from relations of dependence, a politics of invulnerability might (have to) establish new relations of force and obedience that bring its beneficiaries into more intimate contact with their antagonists than they might wish. Conversely, the resistance to such a politics might also entail a redirection of vulnerability, so that both power and resistance can seem to trade in the same currency. Violent resistance quite obviously seeks to remind those who think of themselves as invulnerable of their frailty and mortality. C. Jason Throop usefully reminds us that ‘vulnerability’ is derived from the Latin root ‘vulnerare’, meaning ‘to wound’. And non-violent resistance also seeks to wound, even if its targets are different – the conscience rather than the body, perhaps.

Thus the will to power might perhaps be understood as an aspiration to redistribute vulnerability. And yet, oddly, the acquisition of power may actually exacerbate vulnerability. In my own discipline of International Relations, we are familiar with the paradoxical vulnerability of the imperial superpower, which, by definition, defines its interests so expansively as to be vulnerable to attack in ways and places that extend well beyond its physical borders. With great power comes great responsibility and, we might add, great vulnerability. This might offer another reason to share Judith Butler’s reluctance to map vulnerability neatly on to a lack of power and agency. The problem is not only that the ascription of vulnerability to some threatens to evacuate their agency while conferring on others the obligation to attenuate this vulnerability, thereby inviting paternalistic gestures of care (or, worse, protection rackets masquerading as care). It is also that vulnerability and power may be inversely related. This, after all, is what it means to be constrained in one’s actions by having a great deal at stake in their outcome or, conversely, to be liberated by the realisation that one has ‘nothing to lose’. And yet the vulnerability of the powerful is clearly of a different order (a different ‘marginal utility’, to borrow an economist’s vocabulary) from the vulnerability of the less powerful. To stand to lose a great deal is clearly a very different kind of experience from the prospect of losing the little that one has, even if we might use the same affective language to describe the two.

The tangled relations between power and vulnerability also mean that the psychic states associated with inhabiting positions of greater and less vulnerability are far from predictable. In his contribution to this volume, Throop offers a deeply insightful account of the ‘meteorological moods’ and ‘atmospheric attunements’ brought on by the experience of living through the devastation wrought by successive typhoons on the islands and atolls of Yap state in the Western Pacific. In the case of the Yapese, the coloniality of the climate crisis, the effects of which they feel so powerfully, is only exacerbated by their enduring neocolonial dependence on the United States formalised by a Compact of Free Association, the impending end of which promises to plunge them into new uncertainties. Throop describes how the Yapese make sense of their precarity as a form of punishment meted out by spirits who can no longer be appeased or propitiated as a result of the loss of

indigenous knowledge embodied by the ‘magicians’ or *betiliw* who would hitherto have performed this role. In his telling, their attunement to the shifting and increasingly unpromising worldly conditions that circumscribe their life prospects has engendered an intergenerationally distributed mood of despair. More than simply chronicling psychosocial shifts in Yapese public culture, Throop reveals how moods disclose our attunement to the world.

What, if anything, can be said about the ‘moods’ of the less and more vulnerable, and what might this say about their respective attunements to the world? Butler reminds us that even though we are aware of feeling vulnerability in specific contexts, it does not follow that vulnerability should be understood primarily as an idiosyncratic and subjective feeling; vulnerability, she explains, is not simply a subjective state or disposition, but is always related to an object, a prospect, an impinging social world. What interests me is the disjunction that sometimes opens up between the material coordinates of this impinging world and the sensation of vulnerability, between *being* vulnerable and *feeling* vulnerable if that distinction even makes sense. How is it that overwhelming majorities sometimes claim to feel vulnerable to minorities? How can nuclear-armed states claim to feel under existential threat from crude rockets fired at them by a besieged and occupied people? It does not seem sufficient, by way of critical intervention in these contexts, to point to the disjunction between some ‘objective’ balance of vulnerabilities and the subjective sensations engendered by these relations – as if merely pointing out the disjunction would be sufficient to re-engineer feeling. But what would it mean to take seriously the sensations of vulnerability claimed to be felt by the dominant without endorsing them as ‘legitimate grievances’, to cite the phrase that is trotted out in the all too frequent apologetics that circulate in the current moment? ‘White tears’ and, following Robin DiAngelo, ‘white fragility’ are some of the names that we have begun to give to this. Is this vulnerability at all, or something else – resentment, backlash – masquerading as vulnerability? Could it be both? Might the anticipation of vulnerability, in the however unlikely event that the tables are turned, itself constitute a form of vulnerability? And if this stretches the meaning of vulnerability too far, might it be possible to repair the disconnect between one’s position in the scales of vulnerability and the degree to which one senses this affectively as a feeling of precariousness or despair, so that the dominant can no longer ‘legitimately’ claim to feel vulnerable? More fundamentally, how can the dominant be made to feel not the faux vulnerability of their resentment but the kind of vulnerability that might come out of a consciousness of their actually-existing dependence on those whose claims they seek to disavow?

Rosalba Icaza’s intervention in this volume provides unexpected entry points into the question of how we might be jolted out of our self-understandings of (in) vulnerability. Drawing on the work of feminist decolonial thinkers Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Lugones, Icaza values border thinking as an epistemological position that situates knowledge in bodies, territories, and local histories, rather than in disembodied, abstract, and universalist frameworks that generate global designs. The central claim here is that subjects who cross borders, identities, and categories out of necessity embody a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity that exemplifies

the challenges of living together in difference. Icaza is interested in exploring how we might take vulnerability seriously as a site of knowing. In a series of vignettes, she describes how academics – quintessentially ‘knowing subjects’ – might develop practices of ‘knowing otherwise’ through encounters with vulnerability. In some of these, the shock of encounter seems to elicit from the enquiring subject a sense of vulnerability that they do not seem to have felt before; in others, the encounter seems to resonate, even if only analogically, with an already felt vulnerability – to bodily illness, for example. As Icaza notes, there is no guarantee that such encounters will transform understandings of the vulnerability of the self and others in emancipatory ways. Indeed in the neoliberal academy, not to mention the non-profit industrial complex, the search for such encounters can too easily degenerate into the pursuit of voluntourism, parachute research, and gap year adventurism. And yet, their very unpredictability means that their potentially transformative effects can never be fully known in advance.

It has become a commonplace to speak of our shared vulnerability to all manner of existential threats such as nuclear war, terrorism, and, perhaps most especially, climate catastrophe. Yet the extent to which power runs through our discussions of vulnerability suggests that it is anything but shared. We confront the ‘same’ challenges with very different resource endowments and insurance schemes. Unsurprisingly, much of our contemporary politics takes the form of struggles to redistribute vulnerability. In this regard, the sharing of vulnerability is a worthy aspiration, one that might portend a more egalitarian world in which, as Butler suggests, vulnerability would not be eliminated through its transformation into invulnerability, but would furnish the ground on which reciprocal relations of interdependence might be forged. And yet, insofar as it is meaningful to speak of a difference between being and feeling vulnerable, material equality alone may not constitute a sufficient ground for shared vulnerability. Confronted with the same crises and challenges, different histories of psychic formation may mean that where some subjects feel determination and resolve, others wrestle with despair and resignation.

This surely has implications for a politics of care, which I cannot fully do justice to here. But it should give us pause to question whether vulnerability can ever truly be shared. It also demands a more fine-grained vocabulary with which to map the psychic landscape in ways that might distinguish between debilitating forms of vulnerability and those that are constitutive of the human condition. Because, just as terrifying as a world organised around a politics of invulnerability in which some seek to eliminate risk in their lives at the expense of others, is one in which psychic invulnerability is held up as a worthy aspiration. The term ‘invulnerability’ sometimes crops up in discussions amongst gamers about the ability of their favourite superheroes to withstand hurt or damage. It’s tempting to think of these characters as simply the current manifestation of the enduring human quest for god-like perfection. But in a historical moment in which the neoliberal notion of ‘resilience’ has become pervasive, it wouldn’t surprise me if the hunger for psychic invulnerability represented something much more prosaic – a strategy for getting by that sustains the cruel optimism of the present.

