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# Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction

Edited by  
Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega



# Victimhood and Vulnerability in 21st Century Fiction

Editors Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega have assembled a volume which addresses the relationship between trauma and ethics, and moves one step further to engage with vulnerability studies in their relation to literature and literary form. It consists of an introduction and of twelve articles written by specialists from various European countries and includes an interview with US novelist Jayne Anne Philips, conducted by her translator into French, Marc Amfreville, addressing her latest novel, *Quiet Dell*, through the victimhood-vulnerability prism. The corpus of primary sources on which the volume is based draws on various literary backgrounds in English, from Britain to India, through the USA. The editors draw on material from the ethics of alterity, trauma studies and the ethics of vulnerability in line with the work of moral philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas, as well as with a more recent and challenging tradition of continental thinkers, virtually unknown so far in the English-speaking world, represented by Guillaume Le Blanc, Nathalie Maillard, and Corine Pelluchon, among others. Yet another related line of thought followed in the volume is that represented by feminist critics like Catriona McKenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds.

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# Introduction

*Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau*

In *The Empire of Trauma: An Enquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (2009), Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman document a paradigm shift that, they argue, has taken place in contemporary culture over the last century. Starting from the widely accepted view that our Western world is currently dominated by the trauma paradigm, and that individuals and groups are apprehended as susceptible to wounding, Fassin and Rechtman go on to address the ways in which the attitude of the authorities and of common citizens towards trauma victims has changed from one of suspicion to one of sympathy over the last century. As Angela Locatelli notes in Chapter 9 of this volume, “[t]hey further define the result of this change primarily in terms of the shift from a politics of illegitimacy to a politics of reparation (page later). Locatelli’s chapter endorses and further develops Fassin and Rechman’s theorisation of this shifting perception of the victims and of the changing norms of recognition presiding over the modalities and values of their visibility. By contrast, Ángeles de la Concha’s contribution in Chapter 4, approaches Fassin and Rechman’s theorisation from a much more critical perspective, bringing to the fore the patriarchal bias underlying some of their premises and conclusions. Put together, these two chapters provide a paradigmatic example of the main aim of this volume, which is to trace the emergence of what we have called “a literature of victimhood and other forms of vulnerability” as the expression of this new, more positive attitude to trauma victims detected by Fassin and Rechman and gaining momentum in English speaking countries since the 1990s.

As Roger Luckhurst explains in a useful introduction to trauma theory, the birth of the mental medical sciences at the end of the 19th century brought about a transfer of meaning of the word “trauma” from the physical to the psychical realm. This shift signals the beginning of a long struggle to get the medical profession to recognise that the psychical effects of a traumatic experience are unrelated to the physical or moral condition of the victim (2006, 498). The traditional Victorian tendency to associate what would later be called “psychic trauma” with mental weakness and/or moral degeneracy, based on the impossibility of finding a justification for the odd behaviour of the victims, lies at the origin of

the general attitude of suspicion detected by Fassin and Rechtman at the turn of the 20th century. *The Empire of Trauma* tells the story of this struggle of the new mental sciences to demonstrate that the victims of psychic trauma are culturally and politically respectable. As Fassin and Rechtman argue, in the course of the 20th century, this undertaking has led to a radical shift from a politics of suspicion to what they call a “politics of reparation” (99 and *passim*).

The ascendancy of the wound in our contemporary age is confirmed by some of the most influential texts on trauma, like Anne Whitehead’s *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Roger Luckhurst’s *The Trauma Question* (2008), or Cathy Caruth’s ground-breaking *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), whose introduction addresses the complex relations between “The Wound and the Voice” (1996, 1–9)—that is, between psychic wounds and the difficulty of putting them into words. After the Second World War, the consciousness of living in a “wound culture” (Seltzer) has become ubiquitous not only because of the effects of Imperialism, the two World Wars, the wars of decolonisation, and the menace of terrorism, but also because, in our globalised society, the mass media offer real-time information on these and other traumatic events of colossal magnitude taking place simultaneously all over the world, like the effects of earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural disasters, the panic provoked by the spread of lethal viruses, or the violent repression of massive popular demonstrations demanding the end of totalitarian regimes, combined with detailed information on the physical and psychic violence exerted every day on children, women, the old, the poor, or the members of religious, racial, and sexual minorities.

This short excursus through the field of trauma theory points to the visibility of the wound in contemporary culture, which does not imply that there are more wounds than there used to be, but that the evolution of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, media coverage, and a shifting system of empathy and sympathy for the pain of the other have come to vindicate the centrality of trauma as a paradigmatic or exemplary framework, that is to say, as “a constellation of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by the members of the community at a particular historical period” (Grof 91). As argued elsewhere, paradigms are complex phenomena combining scientific theories and techniques with socio-cultural beliefs and values, so that the shift of a scientific model should be seen as one salient aspect of a more comprehensive epistemological crisis taking place in all branches of knowledge and affecting the community’s worldview as a whole (Onega 2014, 492–3). From this perspective, the birth of psychoanalysis and other mental sciences may be seen as part of the shift towards the modernity of the Victorian period, with its demand for radically new ways of viewing and interpreting forms of human suffering that the old medical paradigms were unable to explain. By the same token, the ensuing shift from a politics of suspicion

to a politics of reparation may be seen as part of the change of perspective brought about by this paradigmatic shift in the conception of what it is to be human, which implies that, to a greater degree than in previous, more positivist eras, humanity tends to be characterised by the susceptibility to being wounded.

Such a vision calls to mind some other paradigmatic figures of the contemporary, like the victim. Indeed, in a (post-)traumatic age, victimhood appears as a central notion; the victim, both as a category and in its individuality, has been paid more attention, it seems, than in previous periods. And it will come as no surprise that the *OED* should give definitions of the victim as “a person who [...] suffers severely in body or property, through cruel or oppressive treatment” or, among other possibilities, “[o]ne who is reduced or destined to suffer under some oppressive or destructive agency.” In both cases, the susceptibility to suffering is duly underscored, and we may understand why, in today’s wound culture, victimhood and its representations have been granted increased visibility.

Susceptibility to suffering and, more specifically, to the wound is also at the core of a related notion whose fortune seems to have most dramatically changed too, i.e. vulnerability. The common denominator to all definitions of vulnerability is “exposure” or “susceptibility,” as another glance at the *OED* would make clear. In its first acceptation, to be vulnerable means that one “may be wounded, susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury” but, in the second, vulnerability is extended beyond the provinces of the merely physical: “Open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature.” Whether applied to the physical or to the psychological, vulnerability refers to exposure and openness to an aggression. Since to be vulnerable implies being susceptible to violence or wounding, vulnerability may be said to point at the fundamental fact that to be human is to be open to a violent expression of alterity. In other words, vulnerability appears as the condition that makes autonomy impossible, the situation in which the self manifests itself in relation to some constrictive other.

Bringing in the self/other pair is, as a matter of course, a way of ushering in the idea of the ethical relation, as taken from Emmanuel Levinas’s influential insistence on the obligation of a non-violent encounter with the face of the other, and what he famously refers to as the “face to face” (Levinas 79–80). And with Levinas’s name there comes in the whole of what has been called the “ethical turn,” a paradigm shift in the related fields of moral philosophy and literary theory that took hold of the academic world in the 1980s as a reaction against the relativism propounded by postmodernist thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard and his theory of simulation, and some extreme interpretations of deconstruction. In a number of earlier studies, we mapped out this “ethical turn” firstly in its relation to contemporary experimental

literature (Onega and Ganteau 2007), and then to contemporary trauma literature (Onega and Ganteau 2011). We examined the close connection between ethics and aesthetics and the ways in which the literary presentation of trauma accommodated the ethical principle according to which “the same” is necessarily defined in relation to “the other” (Ganteau and Onega 2011, 7–16). With traumatic cases and their narrative presentations, what is at stake is the evocation of an other that is only partly assimilated (or, in cases of extreme trauma, radically unassimilated) and can at best only be glimpsed at by the subject. In the trauma narratives analysed in several of the collections of essays that we edited, novels by Peter Ackroyd, Pat Barker, Eva Figes, Ian McEwan, Jon McGregor, David Mitchell, Will Self, and Jeanette Winterson, among many others, were shown to display the traditional ingredients of trauma fiction as defined by Anne Whitehead, namely, fragmentation and intensification (84). In most cases too, such narratives present the reader with a specific way of performing what Caruth famously called “unknowing” (1996, 3), by privileging tentativeness and groping, and once again by performing some form of beating about the hermeneutic bush. In all such instances, the subject is shown to be fumbling towards some unknown yet violently symptomatic presence within its fragmented self. When considering extreme cases, this has been referred to in terms of an “internal foreign body” (Press 69, our translation). Similarly, in their seminal study, *The Shell and the Kernel* (1987), Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok find the site of the alterity that trauma is compounded of to lie inside the subject, when the latter creates a crypt enclosing awful secrets that are, however, silently transmitted to the following generation (22 and *passim*). All these considerations led us to tackle, in another volume (Ganteau and Onega 2013), how romance strategies have become an essential component of trauma fiction in general and traumatic realism in particular. The analysis of a good number of works by canonical and non-canonical contemporary British writers brought to the fore, among others, the deconstructive powers of the darker type of romance and its adequacy to perform traumatic acting out and fragmentation; the use of various types of ghost stories as medium for the evocation of transgenerational trauma; and the therapeutic drive of romance that favours a narrative presentation of the working-through phase of trauma. From this, we moved on to tackle, in yet another volume of collected essays (Onega and Ganteau 2014), the relationship between ethics and the choice of narrative and generic forms observable in contemporary trauma narratives dealing with individual and collective traumas and running all the spectrum from the testimonial novel and the fictional autobiography to the fake memoir. The analyses showed that such strategies as generic hybridisation and/or narrative experimentation are aimed at fighting the unrepresentability of trauma by *performing* rather than representing it.

The conclusions reached in these two volumes provided ample evidence of the contemporary writers' strongly felt need to adapt the traditional narrative, generic and modal forms to meet the demand of representing *ethically* the collective and individual traumas of our age. Central to this demand is the insight, implicit in Abraham and Torok's concept of cryptophoria and the attendant figure of haunting or possession, that the traumatic site of otherness is situated both inside and outside the subject, insofar as it relies on (an)other individual(s) and another time. Now, such a vision of trauma as related to alterity is also envisaged by several commentators, among whom Caruth, when she insists on the necessary "connection with another time and place" (1995, 8), or when she mentions the fact that trauma is systematically enmeshed with alterity, and warns readers that trauma should not be only read as

the story of the individual in relation to his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound. (1996, 8)

These lines bring to the fore the basic affinity between trauma studies and the ethical turn—in other terms, between trauma and an ethics of the other—since the wound is seen as the unmistakable trace of a relation, including a link to the other's wound. Similarly, the current cultural, political, and societal emphasis on trauma is embedded in a discourse that professes more attention to the other. In this respect, it is tied up with the ethical turn, and such a context is naturally attuned to the contemporary emphasis on, and responsibility for victimhood and vulnerability as susceptibility to the wound.

At the same time, attention to the other in his/her singularity comes high on the agenda of the upholders of an ethics of care that constitutes yet another inflection in contemporary culture, politics, and ethics germane to the development of specific/singular, concrete consideration of the suffering others. Victimhood and vulnerability are at the heart of care, from the early theorisation of the concept onwards. This appears in Carol Gilligan's original and famous definition of the "different voice" of some women, in which she detects a "sense of vulnerability" (66). One may also remember the way in which Gilligan tips the scales in favour of such vulnerability by underlining its value and creativity. This will help her stand against a first, masculine, moral language and perspective, and to vindicate—echoing the concept of *écriture féminine* advocated by Hélène Cixous and other French feminists since the 1960s (Jensen)—a second, "feminine language," based, in this case, on an ethics of care attuned to the powers of the maternal, in which responsibility for the other looms extremely large: "The elaboration of this concept of



responsibility and its fusion with a maternal reality that seeks to ensure care for the dependent and unequal characterises the second perspective. At this point, the good is equated with caring for others" (Gilligan 74). From Gilligan's perspective, then, "identity expands to include the experience of interconnection" (173), which implies that the ethical model that she has in mind is one in which alterity is systematically taken into account, and that the subject of care is by definition susceptible to the other's wound and vulnerability. Even if Gilligan does not quote Levinas in her ground-breaking study, their visions of ethics converge in many ways, not only through openness to the other (even if Gilligan does not consider this explicitly in ontological terms), but also because, like the ethics of alterity, "the ethic of care relies on the premise of nonviolence" (Gilligan 174) and is represented by the maternal-feminine, while Levinas offers as a paradigmatic example of ethical responsibility the abnegation and hospitality of biblical Rebecca (Levinas 1969, 33–73). One notable way in which the two approaches diverge, though, is through the modality of the founding responsibility for the other that contrasts Levinas's abstraction with Gilligan's concreteness. For Gilligan and her followers, being responsible for the other implies the *practice* of care giving and care receiving, care being both a practice and a disposition as opposed to a set of rules or principles (Tronto 104, 126–27).<sup>1</sup> For such followers of Gilligan as Joan C. Tronto or Robert E. Goodin, the ethics of care is also a politics of care, as Tronto evokes "political commitment" (178) while Goodin insists on our "responsibility *to* people *for* actions and choices" (141, emphasis in the original). Such views activate the political edge of the ethics of care, and later theorists, like Virginia Held, emphasise the ways in which care goes against the grain of liberal individualism (Held 13), against the utilitarian model (58), and against the constraints of the market (113) so as to advocate a vision of the subject as "embedded and encumbered [...] intertwined" (15). This conception is miles away from the triumphant vision, promoted by liberal humanist ethics, of the (male)individual as draped in some splendid autonomy. Attentiveness to and help of the other become the hallmarks of care as a practice that privileges the positive roles of emotions, responsiveness to the needs of the others, and susceptibility to vulnerability. As with trauma, and in conformity with the general atmosphere and prescriptions of the ethical turn, the ethics and politics of care provide a fertile soil in which vulnerability as both being wounded and being susceptible to the other's wound may thrive.

All this suggests that the trauma paradigm, essentially grounded in psychoanalytic theory as it is, has come to be displaced through the dialogue with other theoretical inspirations, like the ethics of alterity or the ethics of care. The fact that it has inspired work by feminists, gender theorists, and also scholars specialising in the politics of literature, among others, has widened its theoretical base, even while diffracting

and renewing it. In other terms, it seems as if the analyses originally inspired by clinical theory and practice inherent in trauma theory and criticism and implying the model of an actualised psychic wound were being replaced by wider, more encompassing considerations taking such notions as susceptibility to the wound, exposure, and victimhood as potentialities or general characteristics helping define what it is to be human. In such an evolution may be seen, we would argue, the advent of a vulnerability paradigm very much indebted to the ethics of alterity, the ethics of care, precariousness studies, and the ethics of vulnerability. Needless to say, the emergence of such a model would have consequences on the way in which victimhood is perceived, defined, and constructed, and, in turn, on the allocation of visibility to the notion and its various modes of incarnation.

The contemporary interest in victimhood and other forms of vulnerability may be tracked down to the emergence of an ethics of vulnerability that has taken various forms, according to whether it originated in the United States or in Europe. In the United States, David Eng and David Kazanjian have perceptively contributed to the debate on non-pathological definitions of loss and melancholia (2003), while one of the most influential figures is Judith Butler. In the preface to her highly influential *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler contextualises the writing of her study in a post-9/11 world that she considers to be characterised by “heightened vulnerability” (xi). Through the prism of precariousness, she addresses the state of the world in what she describes as a vulnerable situation marked by an exacerbated “vulnerability to loss” (19), in which vulnerability is a common denominator of humanity, all the more so as it “cannot be willed away” (29). Still, Butler also argues that what characterises the contemporary is the diversity of conditions for its recognition, implying that the vulnerability of some more privileged citizens is more easily recognisable than that of some less privileged ones: “Vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject.” (43). Further still, as Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard have demonstrated, Butler tends to use precariousness and vulnerability as synonyms, referring to some form of ontological frailty or exposure (8–9). Korte and Regard distinguish this ontological condition from “a more concrete precarity—in the sense of an insecure existence and a higher probability of experiencing suffering” (9). They also make an apt distinction between vulnerability and precariousness—from the Latin *precor* (“suppliant, supplicating, importunate”)—by introducing a verbal relationship which leads them to conclude that “precariousness forces me to acknowledge the *presence of an other as an addressee*, someone who may, or may not, listen to my calls for help” (10, emphasis in the original). The latter specification is particularly useful when it comes to engaging with literary texts and to addressing the issue of

narrative ethics, while the vulnerable subject's need of even a reluctant addressee is confirmed by the tendency of contemporary trauma writers to combine fictional narrative forms with testimonial narratives. Precariousness, like vulnerability, both refer to some ontological susceptibility to the wound that provides the ground for an ethics and a politics of prevention and reparation. Both refer to a vision of the subject as radically (inter-)dependent and relational.<sup>2</sup>

A related notion that appears in Butler's *Precarious Life* (24) and is to be given pride of place in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's more recent *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* is "dispossession." Here, "dispossession" is used in two main acceptations. The first one refers to a form of precariousness or precarity, whose allocation varies according to the social context or in relation to the global situation. The distribution of vulnerability or dispossession (2), the two authors argue, has to respect norms and may be enforced by government policies. This negative type of dispossession may lead to "induced inequality" (20) and to the extremity of exclusion. The second, positive acceptance which is given currency throughout the volume refers to the capacity to be affected by others. In this sense, dispossession means "to be dispossessed," implies a "fissuring of the subject" (ix). In other terms, to be dispossessed is to be *moved* by an other's dispossession, precariousness or vulnerability (3). The formulation of this concept allows Butler and Athanasiou to expose the subject's autonomy as a fiction. This is why they explain that "being dispossessed by the other's presence and by one's presence to the other" underlines the "limits of our self-sufficiency" (17). From this they go on to envisage an anthropology of vulnerability that is also an ethics of vulnerability, when they assert that "[t]he human is always the event of its multiple exposures" (32). In summary, with these concepts of precariousness and dispossession, once again, as was already the case with trauma, care, and the more general concerns of the ethics of alterity, we are offered an ethical configuration that gives prominence to a contemporary vision of the human as susceptible to wounding and vulnerability.

On this side of the Atlantic, such issues have found an echo in the works of a group of French philosophers. Over the last decade, a spate of studies devoted to the ethics and politics of vulnerability have been published in France, and the notion has been contextualised and re-modelled in various ways. The works we have in mind, all of them dealing with the issue of vulnerability, are those of Marie Gaille and Sandra Laugier, Guillaume Le Blanc, Nathalie Maillard, and Corine Pelluchon. They all draw attention to the new ubiquity of the term, insisting that it has come to be associated with the discourse on protection and has been instrumental in pushing the ideals of autonomy and independence away from the social, political and ethical stages (Gaille and Laugier 10–11). This is what Le Blanc argues for when he speaks of "fictions of autonomy" (2011, 27, our

translation) and asserts that human lives are characterised by reciprocal connection (157). Maillard corroborates this point when she states that the concept of vulnerability helps “move from the separation paradigm to that of dependence” (88, our translation). Furthermore, these French ethicists concur in offering a view of the human as radically defined by its vulnerability. In fact, both Maillard and Le Blanc see our times as privileging an “anthropology of care and vulnerability” (Le Blanc 2007, 205, our translation), or else “an anthropology of incompleteness and vulnerability” (Maillard 336, our translation); and Pelluchon goes so far as to argue that vulnerability allows for identity construction through relation (27). In all such instances—as is also the case with Butler and Athanasiou’s vision of the positive form of dispossession—what is at stake is the demise of a vision of the subject as sovereign, fully in charge and superbly autonomous. One of the consequences of such developments is that vulnerability is envisaged as an ordinary situation (Le Blanc 2007, 168). Further, since, as argued by Maillard (336) and Pelluchon (41), vulnerability is the condition for responsibility, the intimation is that, in the works of such philosophers, we are confronted with the vision of a common, ordinary, concrete ethics that is based on attention to the other, the practice of care and responsibility for the other. In its emphasis on praxis, such a model is more attuned to an Aristotelian than to a Platonically abstract conception of ethics.

Further still, in Le Blanc’s opinion, *doing* something with one’s vulnerability becomes an essential question that he answers by referring to the possibility of empowerment by advocating what he calls the “re-armament of voices” (2011, 125, our translation), which is tantamount to rendering one’s voice to those who have fallen into inaudibility and inarticulacy. By putting together all individual vulnerabilities and securing the ascendance of a collective “we,” empowerment becomes possible without negating the powers of interconnectedness and solidarity, and by banking on them, precisely. Beyond mere reparation, empowerment becomes a means to make dispossession (in the negative sense), exclusion, and precariousness the very instruments of a return to an ordinary life based on access to the basic capacities (Le Blanc 2007, 80–81). Ultimately, it seems as if using or encouraging the positive powers of vulnerability was a means not only to work for the good life, but also to whet the political edge of ethics. Deciding to work on and with vulnerability, as literary scholars, may thus involve the practice and ethics of reading, and paying attention to an ethics and a politics of literature. This is where the works of trauma critics—among which those quoted above—but also of specialists in ethics like Derek Attridge, or in the politics of literature like Jacques Rancière, might be precious.

Working on victimhood and vulnerability as literary critics, we should beware of envisaging those categories in essentialist terms and, heeding Butler’s advice (41), should strive to show the way in which victimhood

and vulnerability are constructed by reference to the perception and literary representation of such notions as race or nationhood, but also gender, as exemplified in the analytical corpus of the volume. Such a project implies considering the singularity of the narratives under scrutiny in the way in which they represent victimhood and vulnerability, but also in their *performance* of vulnerability. Most of the texts that we are concerned with are, in Jeanette Winterson's terms, "work[ing] from the wound" (223). That is, they are novels that evoke vulnerability even while adopting what may be called "vulnerable form." One of the aims of this volume is to show how the narratives of victimhood and vulnerability flaunt their own vulnerable form and become exposed to the reader's consideration by having recourse to a range of specific devices: the various shapes espoused by trauma fiction, fragmentation, blurring, intensification, indirection and other traits of formal excess that may verge on experimentation, the use of spectrality, the espousal of frail generic forms like lyricism or the elegy, the adoption of the tentative mode of testimony, or else the privileging of vulnerable speech acts and risky addresses, among others. In so doing, they privilege the literary event as constitutive of an ethics of literature (Attridge) even while they take part in what Rancière terms a "new distribution of the perceptible," that is, a modality of the politics of literature:

The democracy of literature is the regime of the word-at-large [...]. It is not a matter of some irresistible social influence, it is a matter of a new distribution of the perceptible, of a new relationship between the act of speech, the world that it configures, and the capacity of those who people that world.

(Rancière 2010, 13)

In consonance with this, the second aim of this volume, closely related to the first, is to provide a better understanding of the ethical and political implications of this "new distribution of the perceptible" carried out by contemporary British, US, Australian, and Indian writers in English in response to the demands of a Western world immersed in the process of shifting from the trauma paradigm to this new paradigm of vulnerability and other forms of victimhood since the 1990s. In order to achieve this double aim we propose to read the novels from the perspective of the "poetics of narrative vulnerability" (Ganteau 2015) sketched above, and through the prism of traditional rhetoric, speech act theory, genre and gender theory, etc. Given the innovative character of this approach, all the essays collected in this volume are also aimed at testing the capacity of this poetics to identify the aesthetic and rhetorical mechanisms employed by contemporary writers in English to establish the new relationships between speech act and world demanded by the vulnerability paradigm.

Part I of the volume addresses the issues of affect and its loss in relation to victimhood. In the first contribution to this section, Catherine Bernard takes Japanese-American author Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2012) as a paradigmatic example of narrative tackling the complex challenge of representing the global trauma of ecological disaster. The analysis shows how the text appropriates the motif of incommensurable trauma to eventually address and unsettle the economy of material fetishism and open up the possibility of a re-enchantment of material affects, through the displacement of the object/subject relation and the development of a poetics of empathic attention opening the possibility of a dialectical investment in collective selfhood that ultimately overcomes the loop of traumatic repetition and argues for a relational experience of grief and loss. A similar move towards hope informs Maite Escudero-Álías analysis of *Room* (2010), Emma Donoghue's story of sexual harassment and traumatic seclusion. The novel tells the horror and recurrent rapes suffered by Ma, a young woman who has been kidnapped and forced to live confined in a 12-square-foot room for 7 years, as perceived by Jack, the child she has given birth to in captivity. But instead of considering it a contemporary trauma narrative, Escudero-Álías, employing a politics of productive vulnerability as a theoretical framework, argues that the novel jettisons any teleological view of victimhood and promotes an ethical vision of human relationships based on care and respect for both human subjects and inanimate things. Drawing on interdisciplinary alliances of literary, cultural, and philosophical concepts, the chapter calls for a turn to affect as a renewed attempt to "willfully" (Ahmed 2004) acknowledge non-pathological ways of understanding trauma and suffering, while articulating a new epistemological paradigm of possibility and hope that challenges literary and cultural discourses of affective normalcy. Such archaeology of emotions calls for an ethics of affects that must necessarily move beyond human encounters and enact a politics of knowledge, care, and respect towards inanimate things that may be at the heart of our lives.

The section closes with Merve Sarikaya-Sen's study of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005). In contrast to Ozeki's and Donoghue's novels, which promote resilience and hope, McCarthy's picture of the anonymous protagonist's loss of affect caused by severe physical trauma falls short of providing either complete relief from pain or resilience. McCarthy's protagonist employs re-enactors and obsessively re-builds his unclear memories in a Beckettian loop that gradually becomes impossible to control and eventually transforms him into a murderer. Thus, he refashions his own spatial and temporal limits through acts of excessive re-enactments that foster his resilience but at the same time convert him into an anti-hero of our time. This construction of victimhood creates an anti-ethical model that comes to fruition as contemporary satire, making good Sarikaya-Sen's assertion that the representation of

trauma in contemporary literature requires new narrative forms which, rather than being confined to unrepresentability and ungraspability, are thematically and/or symbolically excessive. Whether they are concerned with positive, negative affects, or the absence of affect so characteristic of McCarthy's world, the three contributions in this section remind us that to be human means to be exposed to feelings and needs, hence to be related to the other and to the world.

Part II contains four chapters addressing the ethics and aesthetics of vulnerability from the perspectives of gender, race, and class. In the first, Ángeles de la Concha analyses a number of US narratives belonging to different autobiographical and fictional genres, dealing with sexual harassment. Her starting hypothesis is that even though victimhood and its representations have achieved unprecedented visibility in our "wound culture," the case is rather more doubtful when it comes to female victims of sexual violence. From this, de la Concha goes on to expose the various forms of coercion into silence and invisibility exerted on this kind of victim, which are deeply ingrained in social and cultural practices and include disturbing postfeminist forms of co-option. The analysis casts important light on the question of trauma and truth, as the physical wound inflicted on victims is psychically replicated in the arduous process of having the truth of the distressful event attested; and draws attention to the complex ethical issues these narratives raise as well as to the way in which they may lead readers to the encounter with the other by harbouring feeling for the victim through understanding her plight. In the following chapter, Susana Onega analyses *The Lambs of London* (2004), an exemplary Ackroydian historical novel usually criticised for its postmodernist playfulness and lack of ethical and political concerns. In fact, however, the novel combines fragmentariness and self-reflexivity with a visionary rhetoric of indirection and excess characteristic of the romance as a mode, and the generic and modal hybridity of contemporary trauma fictions. The chapter argues that the conflation of these devices facilitates the emergence of an ideologically charged counter-narrative that works to deconstruct the Romantic bias for originality and to bring to the fore the vulnerability of the Georgian middle class in general and, more particularly, of dependent women hiding under a façade of dutifulness the forcefully repressed, traumatising and alienating effects of the patriarchal norms ruling their lives. In the following contribution to this section, Eileen Williams-Wanquet revisits Sarah Waters's bestselling *The Little Stranger* (2009), paying special attention to its hypertextual links with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and its indebtedness to the Gothic romance, particularly, the motif of spectrality as ethical operator. The chapter investigates the idea that the "little stranger" in Waters's novel is something within the male protagonist's own unconscious, identified as the female phantom of a "centuries-long line" of suffering individuals belonging in the "menial class." As she

focuses on the class crisis of the postwar period to confront recent history and fill in the gaps, Waters gets very close to looking directly at evil energy. Haunted by the ghost of a ghost of a ghost of a past text that itself keeps spectrally and anti-lineally returning, *The Little Stranger* offers a reflection on the relation between victims and vindicators, on the ubiquitous and elusive nature of evil, and on its origin. The section winds up with María Pilar Royo-Grasa's reading of Australian novelist Gail Jones's *Black Mirror* (2002) through the prism of dispossession as thematised in Australian fiction written after the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997)—that is, the report that disclosed the atrocities committed with the Aborigines and their "Stolen Children" during the period of the assimilation policies (1910–1970). The chapter argues that processes of reconciliation, especially in postcolonial contexts, are particularly prone to foster dispossession, understood both as a form of injustice and as a form of responsiveness and resistance against that same injustice (Butler and Athanasiou 1–5). Proceeding from this definition of dispossession, the chapter seeks to find out whether the novel's use of the trauma paradigm contributes to supporting or, on the contrary, to undermining the Australian national myths' discourse of forgetting and denial. Like the other contributions to this section, Royo-Grasa's chapter takes up the issue of gender, in this case, within the Australian cultural context, in order to address the question of victimhood as relegation, confronting it with the paradoxical workings of visibility. The analysis shows that Gail Jones's text illustrates the devastating effects of trauma and shame, while simultaneously warning against the settler-assimilationist nationalists and some of the Sorry people's tendency to use the concepts of trauma and shame as a palliative strategy whereby they can downplay their responsibilities for the injustices committed and recover their lost national pride.

The three contributions in Part III, "The Politics of Visibility," are centrally concerned with the ways in which fiction may activate the political potential of ethics and explore the conditions and norms of visibility according to which victimhood and vulnerability, in various shapes, may be perceived. The section opens with Laurent Mellet's consideration of male vulnerability in some of Jonathan Coe's novels. He argues that in Coe's most recent fiction (*The House of Sleep*, *The Rotters' Club*, *The Closed Circle*, *The Rain Before It Falls*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, *Expo 58*), the characters are often first defined and apprehended through their fallibility and "effective vulnerability," and that Coe's narrative patterns and "patchwork[s] of... coincidences" (*The Rain Before It Falls*, 277) are to be construed as his main humanist answer for those characters to find meaning in chaos and resist trauma, leading them to self-assertion and a "politics of cooperation" (Sennett 2003). The chapter demonstrates that, though Coe's role in the development of the new visibilities of literary victimhood is first linked to the kind of humanist



writing which aims at putting the individual subject back at the centre of action, decision-making and existentialist praxis, yet his narrative strategies also posit that the representation of vulnerability has to do with moving, acting, and writing aside. These strategies respond to a political logics of deviation aimed at creating literary forms of vulnerability that Mellet equates with an original aesthetics and ethics of the accidental, the comic, the alternative, and, eventually, of self-delusion. In the next chapter, Angela Locatelli explores the issues of the definition of “the victim” and of the cultural perception of processes of victimisation primarily after Michel Foucault’s concept of *régimes de vérité* (2008, 33–34) and suggests that fictional literature, together with medicine, psychiatry, and the social sciences, can be highly significant at the epistemological and heuristic levels of trauma definition as well as an important tool in a politics of reparation. Locatelli then goes on to explore the role of literature in illustrating and promoting a better understanding of the conditions of the traumatised and in shaping a language of empathy through a reading of Rupa Bajwa *The Sari Shop* (2004), a novel which offers a perceptive critique of the post(?) colonial regimes of truth through which the victim is defined in contemporary India and beyond. In the essay closing this section, Jean-Michel Ganteau offers a reading of Neil Bartlett’s *Skin Lane* (2007) centred on the issues of trauma, vulnerability, and dispossession as modalities of victimhood enforced on the marginalised gay community in the Britain of the late 1960s. *Skin Lane* documents life in London’s eponymous street, the secular locale of the furriers’ trade, in 1967, the year when the Sexual Offences Act was passed, decriminalising homosexual acts between adults in private. Against this realistic background, the novel chooses to circuitously draw up its own ethical agenda by re-visiting the “Beauty and the Beast” legend and re-scripting it as a bitter elegy. The analysis demonstrates that *Skin Lane* is essentially a trauma narrative, in which the main protagonist’s individual trauma harks back and forward to that of the community of people deprived of their rights. Far from considering victimhood as essence, it takes pains to reveal its constructedness at the hands of what has recently been identified as dispossession (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). Even while addressing the issue of vulnerability as an inherently human quality—something that makes us responsible for one another—it strives to demonstrate its cultural constructedness. Instead of envisaging vulnerability as force (Le Blanc 2011), it provides a narrative line which falls short of empowerment, thus gainsaying contemporary narratives of emancipation. In so doing, it contributes to the expression of a politics of literature.

The last part, “History and the Archive,” focuses on the specific mode of vulnerability determined by the radical dependence of the present on the past, exemplified by the connection of moments and traumas in which the individual becomes the subject of history. Exposure to the

event of history makes past and present vulnerabilities meet, thereby presenting the reader with the disjointed temporality of the archive. The section opens with a contribution by Maria Grazia Nicolosi on Lisa Appignanesi's Holocaust narratives that focuses on the reclamation of silence and invisibility performed by second-generation descendants from the victims of Nazi atrocities. The chapter constitutes a theoretically nuanced response to the impressive literary output by children of Holocaust survivors that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and grew into a remarkably multifaceted phenomenon by the turn of the 21st century. A current critical view on second- and third-generation British Jewish writing is that it is contoured according to the metaphysically and psychologically disruptive dimensions of the traumatic Holocaust experience, and that it inhabits an "imagined world" of "impending destruction" (Patraka 56), inflected by a postmemorial sensibility (Hirsch 1997) and born of a profound identity crisis (Bartov 229). This view is contradicted by the argument that, in "providing new epistemological vantage points and emerging moral-political interdependencies" (Levy and Sznajder 87), post-Holocaust memory does heed to the vulnerabilities of unrecognised experiences and disregarded memorial traditions (Tylee 11–21). Drawing on this, Nicolosi goes on to demonstrate that Lisa Appignanesi's memoir *Losing the Dead* (1999) and her novel *The Memory Man* (2004) enact this dual movement from a metaphysics of psychological disruption to an ethics and politics of unrecognised vulnerabilities, through self-conscious rhetorical modes of Holocaust representation. The section ends with a double contribution consisting of Marc Amfreville's presentation of Jayne Anne Philips's *Quiet Dell* and an interview with Jayne Anne Philips conducted by Marc Amfreville. Amfreville reads the novel through the prism of inter-generational trauma and haunting. He focuses on various figures of vulnerability and helplessness, among whom women and children, and on the aesthetics of vulnerability, relying on the insertion of archival material that mixes up—short of blending—with fiction, and on the staging of ontologically unstable characters. The characters' vulnerability is further envisaged through the prism of trauma by relying on the two Freudian categories of afterwardsness and facilitation taken as modalities of the haunting at work in the narrative. Yet another important form of vulnerability noted by Amfreville is that of the readers, whose empathy constructs a permanent exposure to the other's represented trauma. The chapter ends up on an evocation of the archive, in Derrida's acceptance of the term (1998), as indicative of a haunting that may come both from the past and the future, thus warranting continuous, multi-directional exposure. Amfreville's insights into *Quiet Dell* are further illustrated by Jayne Anne Philips's answers to the questions posed by Amfreville in the original interview that closes the volume. Put together, chapter and interview cast precious light on the various aspects of victimhood and