

Call for Papers
XXVII AISNA Biennial Conference

Vulnerabilities: Weaknesses, Threats, Resilience in the U.S.A. and in Global Perspective
21-23 September 2023

Department of Philosophy, Social Sciences and Education University of Perugia
Polo scientifico-didattico di Narni, Centro di Ricerca sulla Sicurezza Umana (CRISU)

The COVID-19 pandemic has alerted us not only to the state of our health, but also to an endless list of vulnerabilities. The environment, personal freedoms, the role of science and medicine, tourism, labor and work conditions, migration, economics, domestic and social life, to quote only some of the fields affected by the pandemic, have undergone profound changes in their structures and in the way we perceive them. Thus the aim of this conference is to tap into our new awareness in order to address representations and histories – past and present – of vulnerable aspects of life, be it the life of individuals, of literary characters, of social structures, of the environment, or of any other culturally identifiable text or context. Vulnerability being the main theme, it can be broken down into multiple sub-topics and encompass established and innovative critical approaches to American Studies, including but not limited to cognitive, disability, animal, trauma, dream, celebrity studies, as well as gender, race, class and politics. An investigation of vulnerability inevitably involves its opposites, and the way it is responded to: from the all-American virtue of resilience, to problem-solving, and pragmatism, the reactions to weakness and threats can provide a paradigm of counterhegemonic responses that question the definitions of “vulnerable”. Center and periphery, porosity, domestic and international, home and the wild, are spatial definitions that involve vulnerable as well as strong practices and phenomena, whose mutual interaction, dialogue, confrontation and contrast can be the focus of proposed papers. Since the concept of vulnerability is historically and culturally determined, we encourage the study of vulnerable social (ethnic, national, class, gender, racial) groups, but we must be on the alert for those who capitalize on the purported weakness of minorities or on the need to protect hegemonic bulwarks (borders, purity, family, race, privilege). We must be aware that fictitious vulnerabilities can be weaponized to attack and weaken freedoms through, for instance, uses and abuses of censorship. The mediating potential of vulnerable assets should also be taken into account, as they could serve to balance the instability of systems. Historical research and literary criticism can provide a gauge for the oscillation of the idea of the vulnerable versus the un-attackable in texts, social and cultural strategies, groups and phenomena. Vulnerability also acts as catalyst for violence, oppression, discrimination, opacity, and fraud, but at the same time it can function as a site for secrecy and dissidence that proves productive rather than destructive. Recent studies have suggested that our present is marked by an “endless disclosure”, where the catchword is mandatory

transparency. The so-called transparency society, apparently rooted in the visibility of social networks, has indeed been traced back to Early Modernity, connecting self-exposure to discourses on power and surveillance and to their opposites: vulnerability and freedom. Besides history and literature, the panels will ideally address the (past or future) vulnerability of such entities as archives, printed texts, performances, literary canons, translated texts, religions, democracy, and educational institutions. Within the frame of critical approaches sketched above, vulnerability and its sub-themes can be investigated including, but not limited to, the following fields and topics:

Activism

Autobiography / Autobiographical Literary Criticism

Body Shaming

Cultural Appropriation

Diaspora Studies

Digital Humanities

Disability Studies

Environmental Studies / Ecocriticism

Film Studies / Star Studies

Food Studies

History of Sexuality

Human Rights

Intellectual Property

International Relations

Literary Criticism / Literary History

Medical Humanities

Memory Studies / Memorialization / Memoryscapes

Museum Studies

Popular Culture

Prison Studies

Social History

Soundscapes

Sports Studies

Textual Poaching

Trauma Studies

Urban Fiction

Utopian / Dystopian Literature

YAL (Young Adult Literature) / Children's Literature

TIMELINE

Please send proposals to the panel coordinators by May 7th with an abstract of up to 200 words and a short bio. By May 21st coordinators will communicate acceptance by mail and will proceed to publication on the conference website.

Panel 1

Vulnerability and Resilience in Italian America: Strategies for Survival

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The recent Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted some problems that have affected America since immemorial times. Social inequalities have become increasingly evident, job loss (with all its social implications) has escalated, and social distancing has eroded an already precarious sense of community. In many cases, however, instead of breeding paranoia, isolation, mistrust, and intolerance, the pandemic has encouraged either adopting previously unexplored perspectives or sharing one's survival strategies to develop resilience and mental adaptability.

By focusing on the Italian American experience (both present and past), this workshop investigates the strategies articulated by fiction and non-fiction writers and visual artists to overcome feelings of loss, nostalgia, and fear, thus developing endurance and resilience. A newly discovered sympathy with nature, freshly devised ways to cherish one's heritage (digital and physical archives, blogs, networks, festivals), and a sense of interconnectedness between generations developed through storytelling and the passing of traditions are some possible tactics to be discussed.

A different way to look at the environment we belong to is also a direct consequence of the pandemic emergency. Investigating new lines of ecocriticism in Italian American studies is also part of the aim of this panel, which encourages papers on subject matters connected with the environment and the natural world. The relationship between 'Ecocriticism' and 'Citizenship,' and that between 'Ecology,' 'Resistance' and 'Liberation' is also at the core of this panel.

Panel 2

Resisting Resilience: Vulnerability as Possibility

Coordinators:

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“Resilience”, the capacity to ‘bounce back’ and recover from misfortune, has been insistently acclaimed as the leading virtue of Western society during and after the pandemic. While the term offers a glimpse of hope, faith, and possibility in bleak times, its use (and abuse) becomes deeply problematic. Borrowed from physics, resilience denotes “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation,” thereby relying on an ideal (and unattainable) return to the former shape or state—a return which rests fundamentally upon individual capacities/abilities.

The excessive celebration of resilience in the US reproduces what Jasbir Puar has called “neoliberalism’s heightened demands for bodily capacity”, which is troublingly ableist and leaves no room for the myriad ways in which vulnerability may be generative in itself. If on the one hand resilience yearns for the return to a supposedly former vigor or past prosperity, on the other it implies an investment in futurity—the promise of “the good life” (Berlant) to come. In the process, the present tense condition is ignored. Accordingly, the over-emphasis on resilience risks concealing the debilitating conditions of the neoliberal healthcare and welfare systems—the “cost of getting better,” in Puar’s words—as it creates a narrative of individual responsabilization in one’s own well-being.

Thinking about crisis as “not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary,” this panel looks at fragility, debility, and trauma not as obstacles to overcome but as “stories about navigating what is overwhelming” (Berlant). We welcome contributions that challenge the fantasy of resilience in US literature, art, politics, activism, by celebrating the creative potential of vulnerability in itself and/or by investing in alternative ways of engaging adversity that understand that individual well-being cannot be detached from collective, social responsibility (Puar).

Panel 3

Hollywood's Sins: Counter-hegemonic Discourses in US Literature and Culture

Coordinators:

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As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016), the exposition of American vulnerabilities in F. F. Coppola's war epic, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), fails nonetheless to address those of the Vietnamese. Like other cinematic renditions of the Vietnam War, Coppola's classic was shot in the Philippines, once a former colony of the US, and then an unofficial neocolonial outpost subjected to American cultural influence and economic dominance. In their fiction and essays, both Nguyen and Gina Apostol use *Apocalypse Now* as a catalyst for reflecting on representation and power (un)balances, thus reversing the hegemonic narrative about the history and culture of the countries and the peoples that crossed paths with the US.

In fact, Hollywood has a long record when it comes to mistreating ethnic groups and minorities. A rich lineage of stock characters and stereotypes predates the medium itself, embodying American anxieties regarding "otherness" that go back to the days of dime novels. This panel welcomes papers that consider literary, visual, and filmic counter-narratives opposed to the (mis)representation of minorities both on the silver and the small screen, tackling issues of gender, class, race, political status, social justice, and controversies over historical events. By "counter-narratives" we mean both militant and more nuanced works that embrace contradictions yet complicate the picture. Intermedial and intertextual approaches are also welcome, which reflect on the contamination, dialogue, and contrast among artistic traditions, genres, and devices as ways of rethinking national and transnational canons.

keywords: *intermediality; counter-narratives; cinema; representations of minorities*

Panel 4

The vulnerabilities and strengths of the ‘Great Resignation’. Linguistic and cultural perspectives

Coordinators

Laura Tommaso (Eastern Piedmont) - Corresponding Coordinator: laura.tommaso@uniupo.it
Kim Grego (Milan)

The DIGRESS (Discourses of Individuals from the Great Resignation: Exploring Social Sustainability) research group (Universities of Milan, Insubria, Palermo and Eastern Piedmont) intends to shed light on the discourse surrounding and informing the ‘Great Resignation’, a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that gained momentum during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in the United States, with unusually high numbers of people voluntarily leaving their jobs, and that is now turning into a global tendency.

This discourse, to the best of our knowledge, is still under-investigated from an applied linguistic perspective. The comprehension of the reasons and expectations behind employees’ resigning, and of the language they use to discuss them, may provide insights into a significant aspect of contemporary social change at local (the USA) as well as global level.

Within this framework, we would like to invite proposals of papers contributing to the exploration of the Great Resignation in the United States, with the aim of better understanding both the individual and social representations of this issue. What are the labor and work conditions giving rise to resigning, and how are they narrated, reported, depicted? Are they presented as strengths or vulnerabilities? Is the Great Resignation problematized as a class-, race-, age-, gender-related question?

Approaches may include, but are not limited to: Corpus Linguistics, Text and Genre Analysis, Narrative Studies, Conversation Analysis, (Digital) Interaction Analysis, (Social Media) Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodality, Framing, Argumentation Analysis - but also intersecting any text-based multidisciplinary orientations, such as Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Ecocriticism, and other cultural perspectives.

Essential bibliography

- Cohen A. 2021. How to quit your Job in the great post-pandemic resignation boom. *Bloomberg Businessweek*. 10 May 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-10/quit-your-job-how-to-resign-after-covid-pandemic?leadSource=verify%20wall>
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- Zammiti A., Magnano P. & Santisi G. 2021. The concepts of Work and Decent Work in Relationship with Self. Efficacy and Career Adaptability: Research with Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Adolescence, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12.

Panel 5

Shaping an Image of the Self: Identity Formation as Resistance and Possibility

Panel coordinators:

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Identity and identifications are generally concerned with ways of being and thinking that imply awareness of the self in the first place. If the reliance on or formation of said self is impaired, harmed, or stigmatized; in other words if the process of acquiring one's own sense of self is made vulnerable, identity categories may become seizable tools of power, or simply engender instability.

The vast body of US literature has extensively spoken of the ways in which the daily conditions of our material existence have marked the affective and epistemological dimensions of our very selves – that is, how, as part of an increasingly polarized society, citizens have navigated uncertain waters when attempting to make sense of their location within US culture.

In light of these premises, this panel invites proposals which address the ways that literary artifacts respond to and refigure identity crises and vulnerable selves, and welcome, rather than resolve, the complexity of lived experiences, thus giving way to significant overlaps between personal and public spheres of action. Indeed, not only does art function as a critical and creative discourse capable of revealing the processes underlying the dialectics between self and reality; it also redemptively restores a sense of agency to socially, politically, and culturally displaced communities. Topics of interest may address – but are not limited to – the literary intersections between identity, vulnerability and any of the following: race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture, aesthetics, history, and consciousness.

Panel 6

California on the Brink: Exploring the Vulnerability of the Golden Dream

Coordinators: Vincenzo Bavaro Università di Napoli “L’Orientale” (vbavaro@unior.it), e Antonio Di Vilio, Università degli Studi di Udine/Trieste (ANTONIO.DIVILIO@phd.units.it)

In the past few years California has witnessed extreme social, environmental, and cultural phenomena that exposed the fragility of the California dream. Tens of thousands of workers laid off from the Silicon Valley giants, hundreds of thousands of Californians leaving the State in an unprecedented exodus, extreme weather conditions, an escalating homeless crisis, these are just a few of the images that come to mind when we think of California as a place on the brink of collapse. However, as historian Mike Davis famously argued in *Ecology of Fear* (1998), the “imagination of disaster” is nothing new in the history of the Golden State, as conspicuously shown in the dystopian literature set in the State.

The California model, with its blinding success and images of wealth and modernity, has often displayed its cracks: from the agricultural strikes of the early 1930s to the Zoot Suits Riots in 1943, from the Berkeley Students’ Protests to the Watts Riot (1965) to the L.A. riots (1992), and again through clashes in Chavez Ravine or in Compton Cafeteria, and through the extraordinary appeal of new cults, domestic terrorism, infamous serial killers, the California dream strengthened and survived. Indeed, the representation of California has always developed from the contradictions between its powerful visions of utopia and an impending doom, to borrow from Joan Didion’s *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968).

This panel welcomes presentations of new and ongoing research on California and its vulnerabilities, socially, culturally, environmentally, with a particular interest in the cinematic and literary representation of the State.

Panel 7

America's Vulnerabilities: U.S. Hegemony vis à vis Europe

Panel coordinator:

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The panel tackles the complex issue of American vulnerability and resilience in contemporary Euro-American relations. More specifically, it discusses the manifestation of US hegemony – its nature, transformation, and inner dilemmas – within the framework of Atlantica (1945-2022).

The transatlantic postwar order buttressed an Atlantic Community - hierarchically structured and organized - grounded on a strong American hegemony. During the Cold War, the US proved indeed capable of negotiating a specific international order sustained by a general domestic consensus, widely accepted by the European counterparts, and maintained mostly without coercion. Multiple leverages were used to promote and reinforce it in the economic, cultural, military, and political realms. Such a multidimensional manifestation of the hegemony rendered it all the more pervasive, enduring and ultimately effective. This does not mean, however, that the Community was crises-free. On the contrary, the contestation of American overwhelming power materialized in various multilayered conflicts.

The panel has two main objectives. The first is to discuss the European and Italian perceptions of American power - its weaknesses and contradictions - and their broader impact on the Atlantic compromise during the Cold War. The second is to examine the contestation and vulnerability of the US-centric “Western” order in more recent times. To achieve this second objective, it also engages with the manifold crises and fractures in the post-2008 Atlantic system, offering a reflection on American vulnerabilities in a world that - according to historian Jeremy Adelman – is turning into a system of “tribal” interdependences.

Panel 8

Plotting Vulnerability, Writing Back Freedom: Narrative and Visual Imagination

Coordinators

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Thinking about vulnerability necessarily implies some reflections on the structural dynamics and discursive practices through which individuals and social groups are *forced* into a condition of existential precariousness. The concrete marginalization, oppression, and straightforward erasure of certain targeted identities finds a counterpart in rhetorical strategies and narrative constructs through which vulnerability is waged and maintained for the sake of the neoliberal state's symbolic integrity. Among others, Judith Butler has written about "precarious lives" whose frailty is laid bare and denied a proper public recognition at the same time; Achille Mbembe has argued for state-sanctioned "necropolitics"—through which groups of citizens are permanently exposed to the possibility of death—as a fundamental feature of contemporary power relations; Afropessimist thinkers such as Jared Sexton and Calvin R. Warren have redefined Blackness as the human Other from which life is constantly drained to keep whiteness whole.

Literature, cinema, and the arts can mirror such underlying dynamics or engage with them in an attempt to address vulnerability creatively and identify sites of intervention able to make this condition visible and eventually redress its logics to hint at possibilities for freedom and resistance. This panel welcomes contributions that seek to analyze the ways in which existential precariousness is made productive, subverted, and appropriated in narrative forms, and how texts and media and visual expressions explicitly engaging with it can be read as socially symbolic acts (as Fredric Jameson would have it) that respond to the ways in which vulnerability is structurally reproduced, sanctioned and/or denied in the public sphere.

Panel 9

Rethinking the American Empire through Vulnerability: Intersectional Fractures and Hierarchies in U.S. History and Culture

Coordinators:

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Bringing together interdisciplinary approaches, this panel aims at analyzing the multiple ways in which vulnerabilities have shaped the construction of the American Empire within and beyond the U.S. borders. Since the years of their formation, the United States have been marked by multiple social, political and economic fractures based mainly on gender, race, class and sexual orientation that have been exploited by social and political actors over the centuries in a multifaceted way. Our panel welcomes papers from all academic disciplines that explore how specific concepts of vulnerabilities have been created, maintained and nurtured by the American Empire as a political strategy to reinforce social and racial hierarchies both at home and abroad. On the other hand, the discussion aims at addressing how they have served as a threat to the American Empire, by creating new spaces of both national vulnerability and resilience that have affected the stability of the system as a whole.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Gender, race and class in the process of continental expansion and empire building;
- Resilient vulnerable communities vs. the U.S. empire;
- Minorities and social movements as a challenge to U.S. exceptionalist narratives;
- The intellectual history of vulnerability in the United States;
- Foreign policies and national vulnerability;
- The vulnerable American Empire in the global world;
- Vulnerability, resilience and the U.S. empire in literature and the arts;

Panel 10

Reproductive Justice on the (front) line: recent representations in popular culture

Coordinators:

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Abortion rights and access to birth control have been under continuous assault at least since the 2010 House elections, and now with a decisive conservative majority in the Supreme Court, the future of abortion and other reproductive rights appears increasingly vulnerable.

Reproductive justice—defined as the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent—has always confronted praxes of power and control, which include the regulation of many issues such as expected gender roles, sexual behavior, abortion, family formation, adoption, reproductive assistive technology, and surrogacy. In fact, activist Loretta Ross and historian Rickie Solinger (2017) argue that reproductive oppressions stem from a determination to exercise power over vulnerable persons and achieve goals that have nothing to do with the well-being or interests of those subjects.

Throughout US history, reproductive politics has also assigned different cultural values to pregnancies according to issues of race, class, sexuality, and nationality in line with the concurrent political needs of the nation. This panel aims to explore the ways in which reproductive issues have been portrayed in popular culture (literature, television, film, music, dance, social media, news reporting), particularly reflecting on conceptions of vulnerability that on the one hand risk identifying individuals (particularly women) as victims of their own reproductive capacity, and on the other hand, shed light on the American insecurities and anxieties about the stability of the nation's social order. We invite panelists to consider how popular culture shapes our attitudes about abortion, pregnancy, surrogacy, and other aspects of reproductive and sexual health, such as contraception, infertility, HIV/AIDS, teen sexuality.

Panel 11

“On Dago Toughness”: Discussing Italian American Resilience in a Diachronic Context

Coordinators: Theodora Patrona (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, tpatrona@enl.auth.gr) and Stefano Luconi (University of Padua, stefano.luconi@unipd.it)

Italian migrants of the mass transatlantic exodus, from the late 1870s to the mid 1920s, and beyond were often welcomed with bigotry and discrimination in the United States: olive skinned and unskilled laborers of Mediterranean stock, often illiterate and fervent practicing Catholics in a Protestant country, they were long stereotypically regarded as agents of the Pope, “inferior” people who held a middle ground between blacks and whites, prone to violence and a vehicle to spread organized crime, interrelated with the introduction of seditious and divisive ideologies such as anarchism and socialism. Italians were also considered as unfair competitors on the job market by skilled workers of Anglo-Saxon descent. As the migratory flow acquired a permanent and family character, the gradual advent of female migrants was, and sometimes still is, met with a suspicious eye labelling the former as backward and overbreeding recluses, so distinct from their Anglo Saxon counterparts.

We seek papers in the fields of literature, film studies, history, and/or sociology addressing the strategies by which Italian immigrants, male and female, as well as their descendants have diachronically and eventually managed to get accommodated into their host society overcoming those initial biases.

Panel 12

“Americanistica” and American Studies in Italy: A Dominant Vulnerability?

Coordinators:

Nicola Paladin, Università “G. d’Annunzio” di Chieti-Pescara (nicola.paladin@unich.it)

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The academic field of American literature in Italy intersects several controversial ambivalences. Its vulnerability within the institutions that regulate Italian academic disciplines and areas collides with its current cultural dominance and marketability. On the one hand, the autonomy of American literature in Italian universities has been problematic ever since its start; on the other hand, the emphasis on literary studies limits a closer dialogue between American literature and American Studies. These and other clashes create a paradoxical condition of what may be defined as a “dominant vulnerability” or a “vulnerable dominance”.

Considering these premises, the panel aims at exploring the origins and evolution of “americanistica” in Italy, by focusing on its manifold constituencies. These aspects include, for example, the founding dynamics of the discipline both in and out of academia (Martinez 2022), the theoretical and critical dialogue with American Studies in the United States (Izzo and Mariani 2004, Pontuale 2007, Izzo 2009), or processes of canonization of American literature in the Italian book publishing industry (Briascio 2016) and literary studies in Italy.

Another collision involves teaching practices and the preparation of syllabi for undergraduate students. In this matter, the dialogue between American Studies in the US and in Italy induces to rethink and re-elaborate the very notion of “American literature” as a field and a subject in light of several, up-to-date methodological contributions which shape both American Studies scholarship and teaching activities.

Panel 13

Countering Cultural Vulnerability through Intermedial and Intercultural Interventions

**Coordinators: Valentina Rapetti, Università degli Studi della Tuscia
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In recent years, intermediality has played a pivotal role in counterbalancing the axiomatic superiority of the written text over audiovisual art forms. It has thus contributed to expanding the boundaries of the American literary canon, making it more permeable to previously neglected genres and groups. Film adaptations of plays such as David Ives' *Venus in Fur*, Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Moonlight*, and August Wilson's *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* drew attention to the reception and position of drama within the larger realm of American literature. Medial transpositions of video games (e.g. *The Last of Us*), graphic novels (e.g. *The Boys*), comics (e.g. *Marvel Universe*), and cheap serial literature (e.g. *Penny Dreadful*) increased the cultural capital of popular forms of entertainment. The serialization of novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* took gendered and racialized narratives from margin to mainstream. By functioning as sites of complex forms of dialogism, these intermedial processes and products have countered the vulnerability of non-hegemonic literary genres and social groups, allowing marginalized writers, artists and minorities to forge bonds across geographical, national, and medial borders. Yet, since intermedial practices continue to evolve and multiply at a furious pace, intermediality itself remains a vulnerable disciplinary area that is in constant need of conceptual work to (re)define its porous contours. Pointing at Irina O. Rajewsky's taxonomy (Rajewsky 2002) as a privileged, albeit not exclusive, theoretical paradigm, this panel invites papers that discuss medial transposition, media combination, and intermedial references as devices that challenge received notions of cultural vulnerability in the U.S., with a particular focus on audience consumption and production contexts. The panel also welcomes contributions that investigate literary translation from and to American English as an intercultural practice that exposes and counters the vulnerability of racial and ethnic minorities, fostering more equal and inclusive social transformations.

Panel 14
**Beyond Good and Evil: Investigating the Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in
Audiovisual Adaptations**

Coordinators:

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Traditionally, vulnerability has been attributed a negative value, with critical discussions hinging on the tension between weakness and damage, associating the concept to notions of victimhood, violence, and pain (e.g., Arendt 1970; Butler 2004), but also of self-sacrifice when faced with moral dilemmas (Foucault 1982). However, in recent times psychologists and sociologists have started reframing vulnerability in positive terms: for instance, Brené Brown (2015) argues in favour of “emotional vulnerability” to approach social interactions more honestly; Erinn Gilson (2014) suggests “epistemic vulnerability” as a strategy to respond ethically to ignorance-induced oppression; and Butler herself (2016) retrieves vulnerability as a source of resistance. Thus, juxtaposed to interpretations of vulnerability as hindering and dangerous, we are currently being invited to (re)discover its positive features.

Fiction has always been a privileged *locus* for expressing and investigating such multifaceted dimensions of vulnerability. In this panel, we wish to investigate the intersection of literary and audiovisual texts as generated by practices of adaptation, exploring how vulnerability shapeshifts when translated from written to audiovisual form.

We thus seek contributions that explore vulnerability at the juncture between American literature and audiovisual media. Topics of interest might include (but are not limited to):

- comparative analyses of film, TV, or video game adaptations of literary texts depicting vulnerability in an American context;
- literary analysis associated with film studies;
- reflections on the challenges of adapting vulnerability for the audiovisual medium;
- explorations of the interaction between American literature and audiovisual media;
- reflections on how vulnerability extends to the adaptation act itself.
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Panel 15

Beyond Non-Violence: Violent Self-Defense and the Struggle Against White Supremacy

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Violence has been a pervasive feature of white supremacy throughout the history of racial politics in the United States. State repression, armed racist groups, and lynch mobs are just a few examples of the violent tactics employed by white supremacists. However, oppressed groups have never passively submitted to these offenses, often resorting to violent self-defense and mass mobilization, from slave uprisings to armed responses in the face of lynchings and pogroms.

In the twentieth century, the crisis of the Jim Crow system gave rise to black militias and armed resistance, despite the frequent reduction of the Civil Right Movement to the tactics of non-violent organizations. The dichotomy between violent self-defense and non-violent actions, seen by many as both a pragmatic tool of dissent and moral urgency, sparked open discussions among activists, political organizations, and victims of racial oppression in the US far beyond the Civil Rights Movement's history and up to the present times.

Given this context, we welcome publication proposals for contributions on a range of topics, including but not limited to:

- African American self-defense and police brutality
- The deep roots and influence of Black Nationalism and Black Power movements and groups
- The long history of mass urban upheaval, pogroms, and revolts, from the Cincinnati race riots in 1836 to Minneapolis in 2020
- The violent actions of Black women, who often framed armed defense as an act of selfdetermination, redefining a public image of self-reliant and independent Black Womanhood
- The dialectics of violent and nonviolent tactics in African American history.

Panel 16
The Vulnerabilities of Capital: Conflicts over Class, Race and Sex in the History of American Capitalism

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In the past two decades, histories of American capitalism have been reconstructing the transformations of the U.S. economic and political order, focusing in particular on the late 18th and 19th centuries. This “new” history of capitalism has focused in particular on the centrality of slavery in U.S. economic development, on the role of the State in fostering growth and building markets, on the establishment of global networks of commodities exchange, as well as on the role of finance in accelerating accumulation. At the same time, while carefully depicting the emergence, affirmation and expansion of capitalism in the United States, this historiography has often failed to take into adequate account its many vulnerabilities due to the constant presence of subjects, particularly blacks, women and workers who refused to be dominated by its command, rejecting the violence, oppression and discrimination inherent in capitalist accumulation. In other words, this literature has often ignored the crucial role of social conflict, and of the subjects that animated it, in the history of American capitalism, which on the contrary should be seen as a constant and always precarious attempt to overcome its own vulnerabilities in front of blacks’, women’s and workers’ movements. This panel aims to overcome these historiographic shortcomings, by investigating the social relationships underpinning American capitalism and therefore by studying how conflicts around class, race and sex contributed to forge it institutionally and ideologically. More precisely, the goal is to deepen our understanding of how challenges against the sexual, racial and class hierarchies of American capitalism were crucial in shaping the U.S. economic and political order, as well as its strategies of ideological legitimation. To do so, the panel also aims to chronologically broaden the perspective on American capitalism by including contributions on the 20th century.

We welcome contributions from all disciplines and approaches, as well as critical discussions of recent historiography, but papers addressing the following questions are particularly welcome:

- how did blacks, women and workers collectively and individually contest the racial, sexual and class hierarchies imposed by American capitalism throughout U.S. history?
- how did social conflict and social movements contributed to shape the economic, political and juridical institutions of American capitalism?
- how did American capitalism attempt to overcome its own vulnerabilities in front of social conflict?
- how did the vulnerabilities of American capitalism affect its process of growth and expansion?
- how did economic and political thinkers reacted to the challenges posed to the capitalist order by social conflict and how did they attempted to legitimize it ideologically in the wake of such conflicts?
- what was the role of the State in answering to social conflict and in institutionally shaping capitalist

development throughout U.S. history?

- how did the historiography on American capitalism account for the role of blacks, women and workers in the history of American capitalism?

Panel 17

Vulnerabilities and the Intergenerational Space in US Culture

Panel coordinators:

Simone Francescato (simone.francescato@unive.it), Sabrina Vellucci (sabrina.vellucci@uniroma3.it)

This panel will gather contributions to study vulnerability in relation to what Vanderbeck and Worth (2014) have called “intergenerational space”, referring to those sites in which “discursive practices construct particular individuals and groups as ‘in place’ and ‘out of place’ according to their age.” By stretching this notion to incorporate any symbolic arena in which these discursive practices are at play, the panel aims to expand the interdisciplinary research on youth/age studies and intergenerational relations in the wide spectrum of US culture, by considering age as a social performance and as a social construct which imposes norms of behavior, agency, and relation often determining subjects’ vulnerabilities. We will seek to address issues related to the intersection of age with categories such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, ability and their effects in terms of enhancing/increasing vulnerability or resilience. We welcome papers tackling this topic in US culture (in particular in literature and cinema) from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Panel 18

Who's Vulnerable? Rescripting Resilience and the American Dream in 21st century TV Series

Coordinators: Alessandro Clericuzio (alessandro.clericuzio@unipg.it), Mirella Vallone (mirella.vallone@unipg.it)

How far has the belief in the American Dream gone nowadays? In the face of domestic and external threats, in the age of terrorism, of wars and pandemics, resilience has proved the most expedient skill to date. Usually set in an urban environment that has flimsy borders between the idyllic and the dangerous, American tv series of the 21st century offer a portrait of contemporary power relations in U.S. culture.

The American version of *Shameless* (2011-2022) has by far shadowed the British original, exactly by showcasing the main character's vulnerability as inextinguishable strength. Frank Gallagher's misadventures are always turned to his advantage, often with a full disdain for political correctness. *Desperate Housewives*, *Hunters*, *All American*, *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, *Ozark*, *Manifest*, *Stranger Things*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *The White Lotus* are only some of the shows that are scoring a huge success, usually mingling the tragic and the comic, suspense and the erotic, adventure and the growing-up theme. The all-American virtue of resilience, inherited by such characters as Huckleberry Finn and Scarlett O'Hara, is no doubt the main ingredient in this popular genre. As such, it is called upon to question the validity of fundamental assets, categories and activities: democracy, secrecy, family, gender, health, class and race.

The prospective papers should address the new perception / rendition of American strengths and weaknesses according to these mass-produced shows, not neglecting the re-writing of classic texts for television, such as the 2007 *Oz* version titled *Tin Man* or the serialization of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, or the new (pre-)life of the movie *Grease* in the 2023 *Rise of the Pink Ladies*.

Panel 19

**“In this place we flesh, flesh that weeps, flesh that laughs, flesh that dances with bare feet.”
Dissecting Ambivalent Notions of Black Vulnerability in American Discourses.**

**Gianna Fusco (University of L’Aquila) – mariagiovanna.fusco@univaq.it
Giuseppe Polise (University of L’Aquila) – giuseppe.polise@univaq.it**

Representations of the Black experience in the US have long been articulated and/or read as swaying between two opposite poles: at one end, stands victimhood/extreme vulnerability, the other end being occupied by empowerment/resistance. Beginning with abolitionism and down to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the spectacle of extreme violence against black bodies has been consistently mobilized, especially by white activists and writers, as the supposedly most effective rhetorical strategy to affirm the humanness of the Black subject, and indeed to produce its subjectivity, within the public discourse. Equally consistent and long-standing (see Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs for early examples) is the attempt by Black authors and intellectuals to resist this problematic (mis)construction of Black vulnerability and their simultaneous claim to agency and empowerment as manifestation of that very humanness. Within a social space dominated by this paradigm, Black subjects are, ironically, most vulnerable—i.e. they are subjected to closer scrutiny, harsher criticism, lack of solidarity, absence of protection—exactly when they dare affirm agency and power as dignified and legitimate ways of existence. Literary and artistic productions as well as academic discourse and activism by Black authors have therefore been often elaborated as sites of multiple resistance: on the one hand, to social oppression, systemic racism and institutional violence, and on the other hand to discourses postulating extreme vulnerability as the only available positionality and viable pattern to sympathy for the Black subject in America. To put it in Toni Morrison’s words, “In this place we flesh, flesh that weeps, flesh that laughs, flesh that dances with bare feet” (Beloved 1987).

This panel invites contributions addressing the many ways in which Black discourses—from the antebellum to today—have countered this dichotomic understanding of vulnerability and strength and its mobilization against the full affirmation of the Black subject in the American society.

Panel 20

Affective and Relational Responses to Vulnerability in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Narratives Coordinators: Virginia Pignagnoli, Laura Roldan-Sevillano (lroldan@unizar.es , vpignagnoli@unizar.es)

Post-9/11 U.S. life has been characterized by a situation of “heightened vulnerability” (Butler 2009, xi), which affects privileged and disadvantaged citizens unequally (43). As a consequence of an economic shift in the labor market and global neoliberal capitalism (cf. During 2015, 1), moreover, new-millennium vulnerability has kept increasing. In this national and global context, twenty-first-century U.S. narratives’ renewed attention to current pressing socio-political issues through form (e.g., the blending of different genres; the use of the present-tense) and mode (e.g., earnestness) can be linked with contemporary representations of vulnerability that elicit affective responses together with a sense of urgency.

The aim of this panel is to explore the way these narratives might affect our cultural understanding of vulnerability by attending to intersectional problems, such as precarious labor, socio-economic inequality, ecological threats, white supremacy, and emotional precarity, within a U.S. and global perspective. As private and public spaces are renegotiated in narratives across various media that present stories of care and justice set within the hegemonic structures that produce vulnerability, we seek papers investigating whether/how these stories are instrumentalized and/or whether they *affectively* provide a form of resistance against the U.S. status quo in order to reexamine the spaces in which vulnerability roles are culturally constructed. Furthermore, the panel will discuss those narrative forms and modes that, while inevitably inscribed in the current U.S. neoliberal scenario, also challenge it through affective responses that highlight the centrality of relationality as a resilience tool.