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Forward to the Special Issue *Fragile Selves*

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Summary 1 The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants (1850-2000). – 2 Contents of This Special Issue.

In March 2022, I gave a keynote address at the PhD Symposium on *Fragile Selves* at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The focus of my talk was to examine the extraordinary efforts of Circassian forced migrants to maintain their culture, their language, and their traditions, during their involuntary migration to new lands. Although I did not use the term 'fragile', what I was examining was indeed a delicate balancing act to identify and maintain what many regarded as special and evocative of their native land and culture. The act of trying to maintain the sense of self, the traditions and cultures rooted in a land that had to be given up was not only a measure of vulnerability, but also a stance of resistance (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016). Resisting the destruction of a culture and way of life was also an act of agency. Pushed too far and it could be destroyed. Always under threat and vulnerable, however, did not mean 'weak'. The process which held this delicate balance between remembering the past, resisting temptation which might damage collective cultural memory and moving forward to new places and spaces was the power and strength of the individual. Thus, the fragile self could also be seen as a source of strength, and resistance though easily broken or damaged. This process sometimes became brittle as vulnerable social groups hung on to traditions that, over time, were no longer practiced among the social

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group left behind. The vulnerable and fragile selves became more traditional than those remaining in the motherland. The Transcaucasian fragility, resilience, and brittleness are worth setting out briefly below before introducing the nine papers which make up this special issue.

1 The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants (1850-2000)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, borders and frontiers were fuzzy and movement was rarely restricted in what I shall label 'the Ottoman encounter with ethnic diversity and multiculturalism'. However, a counter movement of nation-state creation gained significant backing during this same period, undermining the political structure of the empire and resulting in significant conflict and mass forced migration, ethnic cleansing, ethnic genocide, and the homogenising of the subjects, the imagined community of new nation-states (Anderson 1983).

The nineteenth century political project to create homogenous nation-states resulted in the dramatic upheaval and forced migrations of over 4 million people from Central Europe, Crimea, and Transcaucasia. Over a period of 100 years, Imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire fought six wars. Each war resulted in the redefinition of borders or the carving out of 'homogenous' new modern nation-states. First, Greece was carved out of the Ottoman Empire in 1832. After the Ottoman Empire lost its effort to protect its northern European lands, some of the people living there were forced to leave creating fragile and vulnerable selves in these new political contexts. Following on from another lost war, Thessaly (1881), Crete (1908) and Macedonia (1913) were added to the Greek Kingdom. New selves were being shaped, some identities were destroyed and new, vulnerable ones, created.

With the creation of each new nation-state in this part of Ottoman Europe – the Balkans – there was massive flight of Ottoman Muslims and Jews into the remaining southern Ottoman territories.

Despite the dangers to their identities, their cultures, and traditions, what acted to reinforce their resilience was the very nature of belonging in the Ottoman Empire. These forced migrants were all members of the Ottoman *millets*. Belonging in the Ottoman Empire was based not on physical birthplace alone, but specifically included the social community, the ethno-religious community of the *millet*. There were three *millets* in the Ottoman Empire: the Muslim *millet* which included Arabs, Kurds, Albanians, Turks, and Kosovars; the Christian *millet* which included Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Serbians, and Bulgarians; and the Jewish *millet* which included Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Bukhari, and Arab (Mizrahi) Jews. These *millets* were social

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communities with religious hierarchies dispersed throughout the Empire and not in one particular physical space. Thus, social groups expelled from the only homes they had ever known and forced migration into the unknown indeed rendered them vulnerable, and fragile, but their belonging to a *millet*, provided 'inner' strength from which resilience could grow and resist the powers working to destroy their cultural and socially constructed sense of selves. Creating social places of belonging in new physical spaces then became less threatening.

Of the six wars that the Ottoman Empire fought with Imperial Russia, which was trying to push its frontiers west into Central Europe and south into Eurasia, the Ottomans won one. This was the Crimean War of 1853-56.[1] Although the Ottomans won and were able to see Russia pushed back to its pre-war borders, Russia was still able to insist on Crimea coming under their orbit. 500,000 Muslim Tatars from Crimea left their homeland and moved south into what remained of the European Ottoman Empire. They were followed by another 500,000 Cossacks (Georgians, and Ukrainians). These million or so Tatars and Cossacks faced particular difficulties in maintaining their culture, their language, and their traditions. The fragility of their distinctiveness was easily broken and damaged and within a short period of time, they were assimilated into the local populations where they sought refuge. Very little is known today of these social groups post their arrival in new physical spaces. Perhaps the proximity of their languages, as well as the lack of any government effort to assist in the re-homing of these groups contributed to their vulnerable, fragile cultural and linguistic differences being unable to resist, being absorbed and forgotten in their newly created homelands.

This was not the case for the Transcaucasians who were largely forced to migrate starting in the early 1860s. These groups became the concerns of the Sublime Porte of Constantinople (a metonym for the central government). The question was not how do we stop these numbers from arriving, but how do we integrate and resettle them? In other words, how do we make best use of them for the benefit of the empire? Although these words were not used, the Sublime Porte looked to turn these fragile and vulnerable peoples with a heritage of military prowess into strong and capable subjects of the empire. Instrumentally used by the Ottoman Empire to meet the needs of the

1 It was a war fought over the right to the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The Ottoman sultan offered the keys back to France, which had been granted the capitulation over all things Catholic as early as the reign of Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent in the sixteenth century. Nicholas I of Russia was outraged because he felt he should have the keys to protect the Orthodox Catholics. He then invaded the Danubian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and sank much of the Ottoman naval fleet in the Black Sea. Britain, France and Sardinia rushed to the Ottomans' aid, fearing its possible collapse in the face of a much stronger Russia.

state, the Sublime Porte also protected their fragility and promoted their resilience and resistance to cultural destruction.

The state took a decentralised approach to dealing with these huge number of dispossessed, vulnerable, and fragile peoples. First and foremost, they set about dispersing them as quickly as possible to underpopulated parts of the empire (the southern Arab provinces). Most belonged to the Muslim *millet* and so there was little conflict in terms of religious identity. This policy of integrating and permitting groups to maintain their languages, their cultures, their traditions, and their religion appealed to the Transcaucasian forced migrants.[2]

In 1857, the Ottoman government instituted the Refugee Code (also referred to as the 'Immigration Law'), whereby 'immigrant' families and groups were given plots of state land with:

a. exemption from taxes;
b. exemption from conscription obligations for six years if they settled in Rumelia, the European part of the Ottoman Empire, or for twelve years if they continued to Anatolia and Greater Syria.

This Ottoman resettlement policy towards the Transcaucasians forced from their homeland in Transcaucasia spoke particularly to their vulnerable sense of self, and fragile identities. The Ottomans set out to use the militarily strong reputations of these Transcaucasians to pacify areas where local groups were in constant conflict. Such roles gave many of the deeply traumatised and fragile Transcaucasian tribal groups an opportunity to re-establish their self-worth, and strengthen their resilience and resistance to powers undermining their differentness. The Ottomans sent many of these groups to create frontiers between warring indigenous settlements, especially in Greater Syria, along the *Ma'moura*, between the desert and the sown.[3] In the area around Damascus, Transcaucasians were given land in Marj – where the sultan pastured his household horses – and in the surrounding orchards, to build villages and to protect Damascus from attacks by Bedouins. Further south in the Jaulan, the sultan encouraged Circassians to farm and to build villages so that they might separate warring Kurds and Bedouins as well as Druze and Bedouins. These roles, which emphasised the military prowess of the Transcaucasian tribes, were significant in increasing the resilience of a people who had been shattered by the loss of their homelands.

2 The 50,000 Jewish forced migrants from Bulgaria and Serbia arrived only in the 1880s, when state support for the new refugees/immigrants was well established.

3 The *Ma'moura* is that strip of land running east from Aleppo south to Amman which can be both farmed or used for pasture running.

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They were able to resist the pull to assimilate, by maintaining their languages, and customs. But they remained fragile and in the effort to maintain their traditions, they became brittle and unchanging. Over time they became more Transcaucasian in their adherence to custom than those back in the homeland, who adapted their culture to changing circumstances and times.

These Transcaucasian social groups were an ideal community for the Ottoman state. They created a barrier between local enemy groups and eventually won the respect of the local population. Initially viewed as brigands and fierce warriors by the hosting communities, they came to be not only tolerated but also admired for their industriousness, and mastery over agricultural works often introducing new machinery and innovative practices that were then adopted by the general rural population.

The Ottoman Empire's immigration and refugee policy, initially set up to assist Transcaucasians, evolved during the nineteenth century, but remained fairly liberal, generous and open. Economically, it was used to populate underpopulated agricultural areas and to create agricultural tax surpluses. Politically, it was used to defend frontiers, to revive the military with new officer classes of Circassians, Chechnyans, Poles, and Hungarians. Environmentally, it used these new immigrant refugees to drain swamps. As a result of this policy, these migrant groups resettled and transformed their new territories; they turned previous swamp areas plagued by malaria into zones of production for farming and therefore taxes. This was probably the first instance of direct, prolonged, and rational state social planning in the Muslim world, probably the first of its kind in the world to regulate immigration and devise a settlement policy that understood the vulnerability and fragility of the incoming social groups (Karpat 1985).

First, there was a flow, then a flood of Muslim Transcaucasians (Adyghe) unwilling to live under Russian Orthodoxy or fearing forced conversion. Abaza, Abkhaz, Chechnyans, Kabarday, Shapsugh, and many other Transcaucasian arrived. By the 1880s more than 3 million fled and entered the Balkans and the southern Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The first wave of Circassians to move south, beyond the *Ma'moura* of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, sought land to settle in that resembled their own in Circassia. This was the Jaulan.[4] With the encouragement of the Sublime Porte, they built their villages in the same red tile style as they were back in their homeland. They were also encouraged to express their faith and build their places of worship as they wished. Here, the Circassians were faced with

4 The Jaulan (sometimes transliterated in English as 'Golan') is that upland range of hills in southwest Syria which most resembled the mountainous Transcaucasia. It was conquered by Israel in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War.

a dilemma. Being all Muslims, they were expected to build mosques in the local architectural style to worship in. But in their fragile and vulnerable state, they needed to also express their differences from the surrounding hosting community. Thus they built their mosques in the 'Byzantine' tradition of their homeland, where historically many Byzantine churches had been turned into mosques and then reconsecrated as churches depending on the changes in eras and faith.

These Transcaucasian communities, renowned as fighters, formed important *mulitas*, military units, and gave many members to the gendarmerie. They had succeeded in preserving their fragile culture and traditions, in new physical spaces within the Ottoman Empire, by adopting a brittle approach to change. After the end of World War I, with the defeat of the Ottoman army in the Levant, most Transcaucasians decided to take off their Ottoman uniforms and stay put. Two forced migrations in less than fifty years were too much for a social group that had faced cultural destruction several decades earlier. As a group, instead, they offered their services to the new emir of Transjordan, Abdullah I.

These vulnerable groups had protected their fragile culture and traditions by integrating but not assimilating. These were acts of agency and mastery. This was clearly articulated in the creation of a flag in the modern state of Jordan representing the twelve Circassian tribes. The flag was adapted from the Adygea flag of the Circassian Imamate of 1834. The twelve stars on the Circassian flag symbolise the individual tribes of Transcaucasia; the nine stars within the arc symbolise the nine aristocratic tribes of Adygea, and the three horizontal stars symbolise the three democratic tribes. The twelve tribes are: Abzakh, Besleney, Bzhedug, Hatuqwai, Kabardian, Mamkhegh, Natukhai, Shapsug, Temirgoy, Ubykh, Yegeruqwai, and Zhaney **[figs 1-2]**.

Today we see a small, still vulnerable non-Arab Muslim tribal group with representation in Parliament in Jordan. Originating from the Caucasian region of West Asia, they were pushed out of Russia's southwestern border into Anatolia and the Arab provinces during the nineteenth century. They carried their fragile culture, languages, and traditions with them as they sought safety. Both resistant to assimilation and resilient in the face of many adversaries, they managed to unite with the majority (Muslim) religious social groups in the Levant, while maintaining their differences. Unlike many other social groups forced from their homeland, the Trans-Circassians managed to situate their vulnerable and socially constructed places in new physical locations. Yet their fragility remained, and continuous effort was required to maintain their social identity over the 150 years since their expulsion into the fourth and fifth generation in exile. They created new social places, so as not to be assimilated into the larger mainstream culture of their hosts. Vulnerability and fragility are here clearly relational and social, rather than ontological.

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Figures 1-2
The contemporary Circassian flag in Jordan (left) and the detail of the twelve tribes (above)

2 Contents of This Special Issue

I have briefly summarised the Transcaucasian forced migrations and fragility of their socially constructed culture and traditions to emphasise the various ways in which such vulnerable constructions are closely associated with resistance. As Butler maintains, vulnerability may be viewed as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016). Resilience is the partner to resistance. In the face of extreme stress, resilience is often expressed via agency, mastery, and solidarity. Resistance to being changed or transformed by greater powers, the significance of resistance to transformations of language, ethnic identity, sexuality and gender identity, of materiality, and architectural expression are all elements that we will meet in the chapters which follow. The fragile self is always in danger of being destroyed, or damaged. Yet that fragility, that vulnerability, is often one of the conditions of resistance. It often masks an underlying strength, which expresses itself in resilience to carry on as well as resistance to efforts to force change. The fragile self may be vulnerable, may be delicate, but often has an inner core of agency, mastery, and strength. That is what the chapters in this special issue show us.

The special issue opens with an article by Phillips, which addresses the power of fragility through an examination of Martha Graham's modern dance interpretation of *Clytemnestra* on Broadway in 1958, at the height of the Cold War. Her interpretation of this role was seen as fragility in strength and masterful simplicity in overcoming the Russian enemy. Clearly, any performance is vulnerable to attack. But here Martha Graham's fragility is transformed in its simplicity as a powerful non-verbal dramatisation of the American strength in its fight against communism.

This is followed by two articles, which examine other forms of fragility and resistance in contemporary China through the lens of cinematic production. Reynaud's article examines Vivian Qu's articulation

of female vulnerability and resistance in her film *Angels Wear White*. Framing this work in Butler's ontological discussions of the concept of vulnerability in resistance, Reynaud elaborates on the way in which Qu puts forward a special treatment of violence and the subversion of the state's authority and legitimacy. The film director also addresses social inequalities, economic precariousness, corruption, and the construction and performance of femininity through the optics of vulnerability, fragility, and resistance to state power. In another article, Ceccarelli examines film and film-making in contemporary China by addressing the fragility of film directors' authorship. Given the current wave of main melody films largely imposed on the market by the power of the state, art house directors' authorship is extremely fragile and vulnerable. Art house cinema and its directors have been able to show some agency by adapting some mechanisms of resistance to preserve their space from the hammer of state policies, and the strength of the commercial market which advertises and promotes main melody films, cultural products approved by the state, and state film regulators. Ceccarelli looks closely at three art house film directors and examines their vulnerable position with film censors and distributors, and finally their last resort of resistance, exile abroad.

Focusing on Taiwan, Pan examines the Taiwanese Historical Films of the 2010s as an expression of post-colonial identity politics. Nationality in Taiwan has always been fragile and contradictory, as expressed vividly in its cinema. The 1980s was a period when the 'new cinema' with a particularly narrative style emerged. This was followed by several decades of film-making which could be described as post-colonial and post-modern. But not until the 2010s did Taiwanese cinema adopted alternative narratives of 'nationality' (non-community), mirroring the plurality and evolution of identity which remained often fragile and inconsistent. Through an analysis of films of the 2010s, Pan reveals how these new historical films produce a text which is part cultural production, part history, and part political society.

Vulnerability and fragility are addressed through the lens of sonic production in Lovell's article. Loudness, loss of self, and sonic social control in Mao's China are analysed. Lovell describes Mao's China as a panaural state in which the Maoist soundscape – represented by loudspeakers, bells, and constant announcements and speeches on the radio – caused individuals to feel vulnerable and in danger. Using Foucault's concept of the Panopticon (1979) as a starting point for analysis, Lovell argues that individuals were conditioned by Maoist soundscape and exhibited great fear from loudspeaker announcements, public trials of spies and counter-revolutionaries, as well as the danger of eavesdropping. He also highlights how such danger and fragility could at times also be accompanied by individual resistance.

Fragility at the level of the state is addressed in Cărbune's article, which looks at Japan during the Meiji Era (1868-1912). The late nine-

teenth century was a period of immense social, political, and cultural unrest felt throughout Japanese society. The shogunate government, which lasted more than 250 years, was overthrown. The new emperor, Meiji, was in a truly vulnerable and fragile position. Meiji oligarchs needed to legitimate the new government. Cărbune examines how the new government disseminated political myths surrounding the imperial family, and invented political rituals promoting the sacredness of the emperor and the inviolability of his person.[5] But in the poems and editorials approved by the government, the Japanese people were asked to worry about his health, eliciting sympathy and cooperation. The Meiji oligarchs, as custodians of the imperial image, manipulated the public persona of the emperor between two poles: sacrality and strength on one side, and fragility and vulnerability on the other. The close relationship of fragility with strength and resilience with solidarity were then used to unite the Japanese people into one nation.

The final three articles of this special issue focus on a diverse set of concerns that engage with issues of subalternity, fragility, and vulnerability: activism around material representations of cultural history in public statues; the particular vulnerability of transgender people in times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and the extreme fragility and vulnerability of the self under neoliberal capitalism. D'Angelo presents a post-colonial reading of the subaltern and space-making as subjective. Drawing on Mbembe (2021), D'Angelo examines the theme of political space and resistance as illustrated in the subaltern activism and decolonial interventions which resulted in the removal or toppling of public statues. For some, the statues can be read as vulnerable and fragile objects at the mercy of unstable memory. In the main interpretation, however, it is the subaltern activism on statues which is viewed as a series of decolonial interventions that address questions of representation and democracy. Gamberton addresses another subaltern community, the transgender social groups that have been most deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Gamberton notes increasing attacks on transgender people through social media and through some legislations in the United States, Hungary, and Japan over a two year period between 2020 and 2022, and elaborates on the rapid growth of hostility against these communities during this time frame. Gamberton puts forward several new concepts of, first, trans precarity as a vulnerability not experienced by cis (non-trans) persons, and cis person fragility, which is the defensive reaction to trans precarity. The argument put forward in this article is that transphobia and the championing of 'traditional gender roles' are intended to function as a distraction to the mis-

5 These are the "invented traditions" which Hobsbawm defined so clearly for other imperial courts (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983).

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management of pandemic responses, as well as an attempt to create national cohesion by casting the transgender peoples as subverters of the natural health and order of the body. And finally, Batalla examines the fragility of the individual under late neoliberal capitalism. Building on Mbembe (2001; 2003), Batalla looks at the 'invisible' extinctions that define late neoliberalism. Here neoliberalism is seen as a force able to modify the individual to the point of losing subjectivity and becoming bound to the laws and logic of capitalism. The individual, as a vulnerable victim and fragile vessel of the extensive ideology and control of neoliberal capitalism, is extinguished as a subject. The age of extinction due to capitalist logic then becomes the 'Necrocene'.

Fragility and vulnerability, resilience to rapid transformations in space and place, resistance to oppression, subalternity, and political systems are all themes that emerge from this special issue. The power of fragility, the vulnerability in strength, and negotiations with threats of extinction, are all addressed with sophistication, and rich ethnographic illustration. Spanning Western and Eastern continents, and focusing on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of society, the articles in this special issue are thought-provoking, frequently reversing the subaltern gaze. It is a rich collection of articles on the diversity of fragility and its interpretations.

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