

Editors' Afterword

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A chance to create a dialogue between young scholars and researchers. A space for exchange with peers from various fields. A pretext to reconnect, finally in person, and engage in reflections on our *fragile selves*. These were a few of the motivations that led us to organise the doctoral symposium that paved the way for the present special issue. As editors, we felt necessary to dwell on this experience and on the process behind the creation of this special issue. In doing so, with these closing remarks, we hope to provide a useful contextualisation to readers and extend our thanks to all the people who collaborated on its creation.

The PhD symposium titled *fragile selves* was the result of a collective effort made by us and our colleagues of the PhD in Asian and African Studies, XXXVI cycle, namely: Valentina Barnabei, Jovana Bogojevic, Giorgio Ceccarelli, Piero Donnini, Chang Liu, Ali Razmkhah, Abbas Siavash Abkenar, and Anna Scarabel. The early stages of the conference have been supervised by Professor Patich Heinrich, our PhD coordinator, who fostered an environment apt for the discussion and development of fruitful ideas and suggestions. The financial support for the concretisation of the symposium came from the Department of Asian and North African Studies at Ca' Foscari University and our PhD program. The symposium would not have been realised without the precious efforts and collaboration of those mentioned above.

The symposium was originally conceived during our first year's doctoral meetings, in the Spring of 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic after-effects were still strongly felt. Back then we were still forced to respect restrictions, affecting our training and, more broadly, our lives. A moment of extreme loss and introspection, in which some of us were unable to move to Venice, others instead relocated to Italy



Figure 1 Perspective from backstage during Professor Phillipps's Lecture. © Rossella Roncati

leaving behind families and friends, and some others could not help but join the conversation intermittently and online.

The process that led to the creation of the symposium and this subsequent publication was thus guided by a reflection deeply connected with our *global* biographies and geographies. Given this background, discussions spontaneously focused on a theme that could not only connect our varied interests but also gave us the chance to somehow exorcise collective feelings of angst and uncertainty: we could not but choose the theme of *fragility*.

Thus, as it often happens, starting from this personal need for answers – or even in the search for a collective response to intimate but shared sufferings – we tried to call for reflections to create a framework in which to position the fragility of our condition as humans, as academics, and as individuals. We wanted to think through the fluidity of our constantly shifting identities often expressed through sex, gender, religion, ethnic background, political affiliation and/or stance, and even national identity.

After months of remote planning and connecting from various countries across the globe, we launched the call for papers in mid-summer 2021. A thorough selection of the abstracts received led to a multifaceted and diverse group of scholars, who then met in Venice in the early spring of 2022. The abstracts selected were heterogeneous in both content and methodologies and they reflected the high-qual-

ity research being carried out on the topic of fragility across various fields. In addition, the selection process tried, as much as possible, to follow a principle of representativity, in order to also include underrepresented topics and, most importantly, scholars belonging to sexual, cultural, and ethnic minorities.

The selected abstracts were divided into nine panels, respectively on: *(Re)Thinking Fragility: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations*; *Identity and Materiality*; *Imposing Vulnerability: Body Politics Behind Forced Fragility*; *Gender-Fragile Performativity: Re-Narrating Womanhood*; *Fragility and Activism: Challenging the Status Quo, Sensorial Nation-State Building: Utilizing Fragility for Political Maneuvering*; *Different Forms of Self-Fragmentation: Retelling Transformation and Experiences of Fragility*; *Cinema and Crisis: Systemic Fragilities*; *Aggravating the Precarity of Working Classes Globally: The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Still constrained by regulations imposed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the symposium was held in hybrid mode between March 2nd and 4th, 2022. We convened in the majestic Aula Magna Silvio Trentin, a beautiful sixteenth-century room located in the Ca' Dolfin building [fig. 1]. The three days of engaging presentations were further enriched by three keynote speakers: Prof. Dawn Chatty, Prof. Ray Chow, and Prof. Victoria Phillips. We hosted them either remotely or in person, and we are greatly indebted to them for their thought-provoking lectures and insights. We are extremely happy to have had the chance to include two of these interventions as part of this issue. A developed version of Prof. Chatty's speech "The Fragile Self Among Circassian Forced Migrants: 1850-2000" is included in the foreword to this issue, while Prof. Phillips's keynote is presented in the article "The Power of Fragility: Martha Graham, Clytemnestra, and the United States Cold War Propaganda", which opens the special issue.

Prof. Chow's intriguing presentation on "Voices, Accents, Selves: Intimations from Two Literary-Cultural Paradigms", deserves a brief introduction. Narrator of marginality, Chow's presentation delved into an analysis of accents as a palpable feature of human social existence. Exploring the concept of *fragile selves* through two literary-cultural paradigms - the sojourner's sentimental homecoming, and the unhappy noble savage - Chow's intervention explored how accents offer material and potential fields through which reframe the conception of polarised relations as the beginning and the end of a journey, familiar and alien places, native and indigenous *habitus*. In her reflection, accents are not just rigid labels but flexible tools, strategically interacting with the speaking-subject (and listener) agency. Accents, thus, are not just a symbol of fragility but the complex result of a lifelong identity-negotiation process.

The symposium also represented a space to reflect on academia. We are living in a time of various global crises, and, as young

scholars and early career researchers in the Humanities, we are often facing not just moral issues but also an extremely complex labour market. Subsequently, we could not shy away from questions that transcend the borders of our privileged spaces for thought and reflection and deconstruct our positions in both the academic environment and the public sphere: what is the future of academia? What is the role of intellectuals in contemporary technocratic societies? Where is the boundary between research and activism? Do we still need such a separation? How can the Humanities have a tangible impact on people's lives? These were just some of the questions that came up during the three days of the symposium and that were addressed directly during a rich roundtable part of the conference program. Even though there were obviously no definite answers to such paradigmatic questions, the fact that so many young scholars are concerned with the future of our field and with our role in society at large highlights, without doubt, the obligation that we have to address and embrace our *fragilities* openly and collectively.

The idea of fragility evades easy categorisations. The concept addresses something akin to precariousness and it forces us to recognise the instability of previously uncontested boundaries. For example, for Judith Butler, precarity and fragility are inextricable and bring forward the instability inherent in social relations. William E. Connolly, on the other hand, looked at fragility from an approach rooted in a critique of capitalist and neoliberal systems, highlighting the idiosyncrasies emerging from the impossible convergence between economic demands and human activities. Thus, when engaging with fragility, we realise the fluidity and constant change that are inherent in every aspect of our lives. These shifts are also reflected in the various theoretical conceptualisations and methodological approaches presented in this special issue. However, what we think all these articles have in common is their perspective on fragility as resistance, as a tool to enact resilience. All contributions to this issue, albeit from different angles, tackle how feelings of fragility and precarity can be reframed as an empowering tool to respond to situations of oppression and violence, both on a political and personal level. The common thread that can be followed across the articles here presented is, therefore, that of fragility as a subversive force.

This volume can be roughly divided into two broad sections. The first one focuses on fragility and its interactions with national and state powers. The second section instead addresses fragility in connection with issues of subalternity, colonialism, and economic oppression. In their varied ways, all authors bring forward ways in which the reframing of fragility turns into a performative and generative act of resistance.

As we are reaching the end of this afterword - and of this inspiring special issue - a special thanks goes to Professors Chow, Chatty,

and Phillips for their rich keynote speeches. Furthermore, we would like to express one more time our gratitude to Professor Patrick Heinrich for his encouragement in the early stages of the organization of the symposium and his support in realizing this volume; and to our colleagues because without them nothing of all of this would have been possible. Lastly, we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Professor Rigopoulos and the editorial team of Edizioni Ca' Foscari, all the authors, the anonymous reviewers, and all the participants in the 2022 symposium. We really hope that the reflections engendered by the conference and then developed in this special issue might set the ground for further discussions on the theme of fragility and its broad interdisciplinary declinations.

