

TERMES

PART 1

FALL 2020

Vulnerability

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1. Shitangsu Kumar Paul, “Vulnerability Concepts and its Application in Various Fields: A Review on Geographical Perspective,” *Journal of Life and Earth Science*, vol. 8 (2013): 63–81. Paraphrased in Barry Smith, and Johanna Wandel, “Adaptation, Adaptive Capacity and Vulnerability,” *Global environmental change*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2006): 282–292.

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No one term can capture the times we live in, the sense of collective anxiety we face, the outrage, or the fear that have come as a result of the shocks due to the multitude of crises in our current juncture—from the crisis of our climate, to the greatest health crisis of our generation, to unrepentant xenophobia and nationalism, to the crisis of global capitalism. If there is a term, though, that evokes a spirit of our moment, it is “vulnerability.”

As someone who works daily with migrant people, I have become aware of how vulnerability can be at once a tool for change and a highly problematic notion. While the term can induce empathy for migrants and their plight, it can also narrow the possibilities to mitigate the risks they face. The reason it does so is because it assumes a dichotomy between the object—the external hazard or threat—and the ‘vulnerable’ subject—onto whom the hazard or threat is imposed. This conception of vulnerability is grounded in the academic context of environmental hazard studies, wherein the term is used as a methodology to examine the effects of hazards, shocks, or threats onto systems, and in turn the capacity or resilience of these systems to cope with and adapt to these.¹ Applied to various branches of social sciences

2. Greg Bankoff, Georg Frerks, and Dorothea Hilhorst, eds., *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

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(development studies, economics and psychology, among others), this framework tends to focus primarily on the capacities of individuals and households to cope and adapt to such external threats, and masks the role laws and policies play in shaping these vulnerabilities.

MIGRATION AND STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

In the seminal book *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*, the authors argue for an interpretation of disaster as a complex process that is socially, politically, environmentally and economically constructed, as opposed to an event caused by an external agent.² Correspondingly, the concept of “structural vulnerability” is used within the social sciences as a method to analyze the varying capacities of communities to deal with hazards, based on their social positionality; vulnerabilities result from an individual’s position within local hierarchies and broader power relationships. This approach to vulnerability differs greatly from others that seek to naturalize an individual’s ability to cope as a result of internal causes.

3. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–191.
4. Gasana Faustin, "Irregular Migrants' Structural Vulnerability and Survival Strategies - A Case Study in Bergen Area," Master's thesis, University of Stavanger, Norway, 2012.
5. James Quesada, Laurie Kain Hart, and Philippe Bourgois, "Structural Vulnerability and Health: Latino Migrant Laborers in the United States," *Medical Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (2011): 339–362.

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In the context of migration studies, scholars have applied structural vulnerability to examine the ways in which the uneven distribution of power and resources built into our social structures (political, legal, economic) limits migrants' actual and potential choices, from their livelihood, education, housing, to their freedom of movement.³ The concept also serves as a framework to analyze three major themes relevant to migrants' lived realities. First, the embedding of vulnerability within a complex historical web of capitalist relations and state-sponsored violence in order to explore forces and processes that produce vulnerable subjects.⁴ Second, the production by immigration policies of unequal access to resources and asymmetric power relations such as citizen and non-citizen, illegal and legal, temporary and permanent. Third, the role of migrants' agency in the dynamics of how vulnerabilities are produced.⁵ I will further explore these themes by considering experiences of im/migrant workers with Canadian temporary migration programs.

6. Migrants Right Network. “Latest news,” <https://migrantrights.ca/latest-news/>

7. The points system is the common name for Comprehensive Ranking System (CRS). It is a merit-based migration program that gives access to permanent residency based upon education, language, skills, and employability. This system was a major part of the Immigration Act of 1976-77 as a central part of immigration reform in Canada. While the aim was to implement an immigration system not based on ‘preferred nations,’ scholars such as Sunera Thobani have criticized the points system as reproducing a racialized immigration system. Sunera Thobani, “Closing Ranks: Racism and Sexism in Canada’s Immigration Policy,” *Race & Class* 42, no. 1 (2000): 35–55.

CANADA’S MIGRATION REGIME
AND THE PRODUCTION
OF THE VULNERABLE MIGRANT

Canada’s migration regime has become an example of how structural vulnerability is produced and managed. According to the research compiled by the Migrant Rights Network, there are currently 1.6 million migrants with precarious status in Canada.⁶ This large segment of society comprises people who face a range of vulnerabilities due to their status as temporary foreign workers, refugee claimants, international students, seasonal workers, as well as refused claimants awaiting deportation or living as undocumented migrants.

Migration has become regulated and stratified in two forms since the expansion of the temporary foreign worker program in 2006: one for wealthier migrants and skilled workers, who can access citizenship and permanent residence under the points-based system,⁷ and another, which takes the form of extreme exploitation without the ability to attain permanent residence, as witnessed among seasonal agricultural workers, live-in caregivers, or temporary foreign workers who also face

8. Rachel Lau, “Montreal Declared a ‘Sanctuary City’ What Does that Mean?” *Global News*, 2017, February 20, 2017, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3260519/mayor-denis-coderre-wants-to-make-montreal-a-sanctuary-city-what-does-that-mean/>

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systemic abuse, wage theft, inadequate housing, and lack of rights. The shift to temporary migration has brought over 300,000 workers yearly on temporary work visas, bound to a single employer and thus constrained in their capacity to defend their basic rights for fear of facing deportation.

The operational mode in the production of ‘vulnerable’ migrants has been to constantly restrict their possibilities to obtain or remain with status. In Montreal, it is estimated by Solidarity Across Borders that there are 50,000 people living without any immigration status.⁸ Those who live without status face the most coercive conditions, every day living with the fear of deportation back to the violence and harm from which they fled. The internalization of the border becomes a central tool to managing these migrants’ vulnerability—through immigration raids, detention centres, and increases in deportation—forcing them into a constant state of powerlessness.

Organizations like the Immigration Worker Centre (IWC), where I work as a researcher and organizer, have pointed to the dimensions of racialization within the labour market, and how migration regimes push

9. Aziz Choudry and Mostafa Henaway, "Agents of Misfortune: Contextualizing Migrant and Immigrant Workers' Struggles Against Temporary Labour Recruitment Agencies," *Labour, Capital and Society/Travail, capital et société*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2012): 36-65.
10. Cynthia J. Cranford and Deena Ladd, "Community Unionism: Organizing for Fair Employment in Canada," *Just Labour*, no. 3 (Fall) (2003): 46-59.
11. Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press and Washington, DC: Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2013).

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racialized im/migrant workers into the margins of the labour market and into precarious work through temp agencies.⁹ Agencies have geared their recruitment to those with precarious status to create a large pool of disposable workers for certain sectors and industries such as cleaning, food processing, care work, and warehousing.¹⁰ Numerous examples have shown how our social reproduction and global economy are reliant on a disposable and vulnerable yet essential workforce, from the refugee claimants working through placement agencies in long-term care facilities, to the immigrant workers in Cargill meat-processing plants which faced one of the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in Quebec in May 2020, to distribution centres such as Amazon or Dollarama which, with the rise of e-commerce, depend on the rapid delivery of goods across Montreal. The asymmetrical power relations resting on forms of border violence and migration policy allow employers and the State to exploit and profit from the vulnerabilities that migrants face, but which they in turn have the ability to challenge.¹¹

CHALLENGING STRUCTURAL
VULNERABILITY

At the IWC, the central aim is to confront the very structures sustaining migrants' vulnerabilities through collective organizing. The IWC works amongst a broad range of immigrant and migrant workers who face the whole spectrum of vulnerabilities, from those who are facing deportation, to those who are unable to access healthcare or to work legally, to those who are tied to a single employer and face wage theft, physical abuse, unsafe working conditions, or who are trapped in low-paid temp agency jobs out of a need to continue working while waiting for a decision on a refugee claim or humanitarian application. Organizing with these workers prioritizes finding ways to support collective campaigns to challenge the specific state policies that enable these forms of violence, abuse and exploitation.

Since 2016, the IWC has been working with undocumented women, mainly from Latin America, working as cleaners through temp agencies. On top of facing deportation and living in the shadows without stable housing, these women also face forms of abuse from partners and

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12. Sanctuary city is a movement to have cities become safe spaces for undocumented migrants. They do so by providing municipal identification to undocumented migrants, which may help them to access services. The aim is to limit the relationship between local police and federal authorities to enforce deportations and warrants.

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employers. Such abuse can continue because they have no access to the social services that would mitigate such violence, since that kind of exposure would put them at risk of being arrested and deported. For these women, the fight for a sanctuary city¹² became a real tangible goal: to have access to a livelihood without fear, to have the chance to work in a non-violent setting. For temporary foreign workers, their grievances have been focused on demanding open work permits, which allow workers collectively to enforce their basic labour rights and shift power dynamics away from abusive and exploitative employers. For refugee claimants and undocumented workers, it has been about challenging the ways in which they are forced into precarious work through temp agencies, and about the right to permanent work.

While all these various groups of migrants have found ways to collectivize their voices, it has been the attempt of the IWC to work towards building a larger narrative that can undo the harm for all precarious immigrants and migrants. The one common denominator across all of our claims has been the right to status for all. Since the pandemic, migrant organizations have found ways to re-centre those who have been margin-

alized and to call on the State for it to recognize how “we are all essential,” and to demand full regularization. This is enabled by an understanding that people are not fundamentally or naturally without agency or power, but rather are systematically produced to be vulnerable. The dynamism of such migrants, otherwise rendered invisible and vulnerable, could not take place outside of a context of collective action and vision.

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Joyce Wieland
Hand Tinting

The work is available for streaming until April 30, 2021. After this date you may contact the Gallery at ellen.artgallery@concordia.ca to receive a link to temporarily access the work.

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Joyce Wieland,
Hand Tinting, 1967-68.
16 mm black-and-white hand-tinted
film transferred to digital video,
colour, 6 min.

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film Hand Tinting*

Joyce Wieland was living in New York when she made her 6-minute, non-narrative silent 16mm film *Hand Tinting* in 1967-1968. The Canadian artist hand-dyed left-over footage from a recruitment documentary she shot at a Job Corps training center and used sewing needles to perforate the film's surface. In grainy blue and green and red and pink, as well as a few sections left in the original black and white, *Hand Tinting* presents young women in scenes of recreation and repose. They sit and dance, they laugh or look bored. Their framed faces and movements appear again and again, each time in a different colour, or reversed symmetrically. A rhythm develops in this sequence of scenes, each one only a few seconds long. Full black or tinted slides, sometimes with clusters of holes, break up the film like beats in a tempo. The film is archived at the [CFMDC](#), and on their website it is listed under the following categories: *found footage, art & artists, race + ethnicity, work about women, work by women*. Labour structures the film, in both on-screen representations of the young women workers-in-training, and in Wieland's artistic manipulations of the filmstrip. I am drawn to the pensive, intricately constructed work, but it broaches, for me, the question of the subjects' vulnerability.

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Wieland was a practicing artist in Toronto before she moved to New York in the early 1960s. There, she sometimes took on work as a director or cinematographer. The footage in *Hand Tinting* was from a shoot she did at a Job Corps Center in West Virginia. This center, and others like it across the country, were part of an anti-poverty program that offered education and vocational training as a strategy to curb high youth unemployment rates. According to a 1965 article in *American Education*, the hope was that the training could “make competent, employable citizens out of incompetent, unemployable kids.”¹ The drop-out rates were high, but most of the 25% who graduated did go on to find well-paid work.² Wieland’s task was to film cutaways of the participants during downtime, allowing the recruitment documentary to show the center’s atmosphere. “I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry about those girls,” Wieland later reflected in an interview. “The center was about eighty percent black kids who had come from everywhere. They were lonely, rebellious, funny, restless, and hopelessly poor. What they were offered in the way of education was humiliating to me—some rooms with typewriters, and a machine that spoke to them as they

1. L. E. Mathis, “Be Somebody: Catoctin Job Corps Conservation Center, Maryland,” *American Education*, I (May 1965): 28–31. Cited in Marie Morris, “The Job Corps, 1964–1969,” Master’s thesis, College of William & Mary – Arts & Sciences, VA, United States, 1972.
2. Judy Klemesrud, “Women in Job Corps—Problems and Benefits,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 1971.

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typed.” As they entered adulthood, many young people were forced to confront the limitations of their financial independence. At the time, high youth unemployment proved their precarious position. The willingness of the young women portrayed in the film to attend these programs, which would take them away from their homes for up to 2 years, demonstrated an investment in themselves in the face of uncertain futures.

The film that Wieland and her team submitted was rejected by the company that originally commissioned it, and so never released. Wieland decided to make her own film with the footage that was left. Her gestures of intervention, the sewing needles to perforate the film and the textile dyes to colour it, were applied elements of feminine craft. These processes are tactile, and, combined with Wieland’s editing, their sensibility evokes an intimacy. In many ways these manipulations and alterations on the surface of the film mirror the girls’ precarious positions. One woman’s face—shy and curious—reappears several times. She sits in a crowded room on a chair against the wall, her chin rested on a closed fist. She watches the other girls, their slack jaws chewing gum, loosely holding cigarettes, hips shimmy-

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ing and shoulders thrown back in the cadence of dance. Her thoughts could be on what's in front of her, or the future ahead when she graduates, going home *skilled* and therefore *employable*. Women's work is often care work, it is attentive to detail and responsive to the needs of others. If the girls in the film were from low-income backgrounds, as Wieland describes, they would likely be returning to communities and families that required their support, their care and their sacrifice.

In an interview from 1977 Wieland perfectly describes the film's ambivalence. "The editing and the girls are the subject of *Hand Tinting*. The editing and the so-called subject are equal. You can look at the editing or you can look at the girls."³ I want to return to the question of labour and how it exists both on screen, in the figures of the young workers-in-training and also at a material level, in Wieland's construction of the film. *Hand Tinting* collapses labour into form and content. This is great. This is the work of modern art. This is the work of the avant-garde. But something remains unresolved. The origins of the avant-garde so often came from elsewhere.⁴ The ambivalence of representation, of black girls used as *matter* is somewhat unsettling to me.

3. Kay Armatage, "Interview with Joyce Wieland," in *Women and Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: Dutton, 1977), 246-61.

4. Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: 1984," in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 335-350.

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I have been seduced, and then saddened, by the work of artists who repurpose subjects found in the realm of the other (from elsewhere) into their films. I'm thinking of Richard Mosse's *The Enclave* (2012-13) and Luke Willis Thompson's *Autoportrait* (2017).⁵ Hal Foster calls this 'the artist as ethnographer.'⁶ Wieland "got" the footage to make this film from a paid job; the girls she filmed were at a training center seeking new opportunities.

And then she used their image, without crediting them, in her own work. As she specified, *Hand Tinting* could be about the girls or it could be about editing; about abstraction or representation; about the artist-worker or the worker-subject. How important are the differences between artist and subject? What does it mean to use other people's bodies as matter? Black girls are particularly vulnerable to capture, and to the difficult entanglement of representation.

In the end, I am hesitant to draw definite conclusions about Wieland's very gentle, very careful film *Hand Tinting*. I am taken by the beauty of the film, and concerned about the vulnerability of its subjects. Perhaps this troubled sense is only mine to bear. It is difficult to assess an artist's intention, impossible to say

5. I wrote about both these works while I was writer in residence at Gallery 44 in 2018. See: <https://www.gallery44.org/past-wir-texts/subject-of-care> and <https://www.gallery44.org/past-wir-texts/will-luke-willis-thompson-split-the-ps25-000-turner-prize-with-diamond-reynolds-if-he-wins>

6. Hal Foster, "The Artist As Ethnographer?" in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1994), 12–19.

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when their actions are sensitive and ethical and just, or when they are using racial representation (consciously or unconsciously) as value-added to their works. I am encouraged by my fondness for the many lovers-of-Wieland in my life, close friends and colleagues who I respect and admire. I want to trust that everyone is capable of making work that is radical, and does not repeat harm. And that what appears ambivalent can be structured by ethics and care. This kind of trust is also an act of vulnerability, and one that Wieland's work compels me to try.

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VULNERABILITY - PART 1
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How does a term circulate through society, and how does its dissemination within contemporary discourse inform us about the way that society thinks about itself? By what means do certain words instill themselves in language and the public sphere to the point of becoming commonplace? *Terms* is an online discursive and artistic program that individually unpacks a series of broad and polysemous terms that are employed today to address a range of sociopolitical issues in contemporary society. While some words acquire multiple defini-

tions the more they are used, they also often tend to become generalized and run the risk of having their meaning become diluted, confused, or unclear over time. Nevertheless, their continued presence in our vocabulary requires careful attention and analysis as to their etymological value, their semantic density, and their use across and beyond disciplinary boundaries.

For each selected term, a researcher from outside the visual arts publishes a text that examines it in all its variants, tensions, and ambiguities through the specific lens of their field of

activity. The word is then considered by pairing it with a designated artwork shared on the Gallery's website. In turn, a writer from the cultural sector uses this same work as the starting point for a second text that draws from the first and from beyond to probe some aspects of the term in its various dimensions.

