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the poetics of fragility

Nicolás Grandi and Lata Mani, self-published, Bangalore, 2016, 92pp., \$50.00 (Hbk), <http://www.thepoeticsoffragility.com/site/index.html>

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that fragility is the spirit of the day. Daily, if not hourly, animals across the globe, human and non, experience inconceivable blows to decency and justice, so much so that it can feel as if there is a non-stop torrent of mendacity that threatens to break or, if not break, at least tear asunder, leaving us in permanent states of fragility. For fragility is what happens to a body, a mind, a country, a planet when it is witness and subject to continuous pressures, entanglements, stressors, deprivations and violence. In other words, fragility is about history. Who can forget Frederic Jameson's (2002 [1981], p. 88) depiction of history as 'History is what hurts'?

So, what would 'a poetics of fragility' look like, or better, what would the project of building a poetics of fragility entail? Luckily for us, filmmaker Nicolás Grandi and scholar Lata Mani have developed the beginnings of just such a poetics in their ongoing transmedia project *The Poetics of Fragility*, which is available as an artist's book, a website (www.thepoeticsoffragility.com), a sixty-three-minute film described as a 'videocontemplation' (Gunaratnam and Mani, 2017) and, at this very moment, metamorphosing into installations, objects and interactive performances.¹

Wisely, in their project Grandi and Mani present their poetics as a working through fragility rather than an argument for or against it. Fragility is a state of being, one that is full of strengths and ambivalences, presented without end, i.e., the point is not to cure fragility. But trauma is the monster that gives birth and shapes the poetics of fragility.² In 1993, Lata Mani was hit at 100 mph by a suicidal man in a stolen Pepsi Cola truck who was fleeing the highway police. The result was a traumatic brain injury or, as she puts it, 'The ensuing illness was the theater of my learning' (*ibid.*). A supremely intelligent, deeply engaged scholar and author of many books,³ the accident led Mani into a world where the tools of her trade, so to speak, were utterly wiped out—disappeared. She writes, for example, in the book: 'It's been three years since I've been able to read' (p. 12).

It is essential to underscore that *The Poetics of Fragility* is not an autobiography. For Mani, the project is not a showcase of her own healing, but a vehicle to connect and make with others. Yet Mani's story is crucial to the experience of the film and the book, since she, along with Grandi and others, is the maker. It is a testament to the potential, undiscovered forms that can emerge through our bold encounter with fragility. After all, Mani's accident/'theater of learning' has given voice to the latent artist/ healer inside the accomplished academic.

¹Lata Mani, personal communication, January 2018. The book also includes the link and password to watch the film.

²The project also falls within the area of trauma studies.

³For a list of Mani's publications, see Lata Mani, 'Books', <http://www.latamani.com/books/> [last accessed 8 March 2018].

To open the book, one must tug on a tab and tear into its brown-paper casing, at which point the very title *The Poetics of Fragility* becomes forever a tear, an opening, a way in. You cannot get into this book in any other way.⁴ Significantly, the tear does not destroy. As the cover splits in two, a top and a bottom emerge—parts separated but connected, holding the body of a book inside. Tactility is everywhere in this book. A compendium of visual and physical textures that follow the logic of the film, whose script was written entirely by Mani. The artists and performers, among them Angela Davis and Cherrie Moraga, read her script. The performances were arrived at in dialogue with each performer. Each performer is framed *in situ*: home, park bench, beach and one long sequence filmed in Berkeley's Sproul Plaza with Thao P. Nguyen sitting on a stool.

While the film is contemplative, the book explodes graphically and via inserts and cut pages, celebrating and remaining true to what we have come to appreciate about the printed book as a haven for the hands and the eye. Each page is different: fragments of text burst across the page; an insert of a sunset is pulled from between pages; a series of horizontal cuts across darkened pages with ribbons of light carries the poem 'We are like fireflies here for a fraction of time./ Yet who can resist the firefly/ as it glows in the dark of the night?' (p. 21). The book also includes an essay by Nicolás Grandi, 'Ontology and technique: portraying ideas, sound as montage', and a visual poem by Mani entitled 'A film in four acts', which depicts the ideas of the film accordingly, laid out graphically as a series of rising and falling triangles; for instance (p. 76):

Act 1
Introduce the key ideas:
inseparability of strength
and fragility contrasted with cultural
assumptions as evidenced in the definition of the
dictionary, followed by a sutra on the impermanence of the nature of humans /
*

Once upon a time, I began an essay⁵ on wounds and art with these words from the philosopher Martin Heidegger:

Pain rends. It is the rift. But it does not just tear into dispersive fragments. Pain, indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same time it draws everything to itself, gathers it to itself [...] Pain is the joining agent in the rending that divides and gathers. Pain is the joining of the rift. The joining is the threshold. (Heidegger, 1971 [1959], pp. 201–202)

The Poetics of Fragility is about living inside the rending and joining of pain without drowning in over-indulgence or romanticism. Grandi and Mani use text, art, photography, poetry, film, dance, meditation, autobiography, experimental typography and a range of textures assembled from the poetics of Mani's writing. The result is a wry and unsentimental contribution to what we might call vulnerability studies, where it is important to admit: 'A Strong Woman is sometimes strongly fed up' (pp. 1–2).

⁴See *The Poetics of Fragility*, <http://www.thepoeticsoffragility.com/> [last accessed 8 March 2018].

⁵See Goodeve (1992).

I saw the film within the context of a conversation with Mani and Grandi at NYU. While the book is an intensely individual experience, I was struck by how well the film works as a catalyst for discussion, particularly for communities hungry for healing and meditation. Shots of one of the mothers of the disappeared, people sitting in reflective, vulnerable poses (e.g., in a wheelchair, naked in and out of a bathtub), and close-up of hands swollen with arthritis intersect with strong vital bodies dancing on the beach with the San Francisco skyline behind. In both, poetry mixes with insight and personal anecdote as when we hear the exclamations of eyes so sensitive to light as to not be able to see, or hands which no longer move with the flow of youth against images of bodies posed and in movement.

In an email communication with Mani, I learned:

We have moved into space-based work (installations, objects). Our first iteration of this expanded version was in Buenos Aires in August this year where we also invited local artists to respond to the project with their own live performances. We are working to develop this further to bring to the Bay Area and this time also curate public conversations on fragility.⁶

It is encouraging, therefore, that *The Poetics of Fragility* is not just a beautiful artist's book and film but an ongoing work in progress about community and dialogue. In this sense, ultimately, *The Poetics of Fragility* is about collective attention, not as in 'pay attention', but as in receive and give attention to what Adrienne Rich (2013 [1973], p. 22) calls 'the place' where 'I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail'. The poetics of fragility indeed.

references

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⁶Lata Mani, personal communication, 12 December 2017.