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Vulnerable Children

Collective Resistance in *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015)

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Abstract

This chapter explores the representation of childhood vulnerability in cinema through the example of Chloé Zhao's *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015). By bringing together film analysis, childhood studies, and theorizations of vulnerability, it analyzes Zhao's debut film as a text that acknowledges the potential of vulnerability as a source of collective resistance. Beyond a straightforward association of childhood with helplessness and lack of agency, the film foregrounds children's increased openness to the material and social relations around them, which turn them into embodiments of the relational dimension of vulnerability. The chapter starts by addressing how criticism and academia have accounted for the vulnerability of children in social-realist-oriented cinema in the past. It then moves on to the film analysis, where it is argued that the potential of vulnerability, materialized only when approached as a collective condition, emerges as both a source of resistance for the child characters and a model of ethical coexistence for audiences. Drawing on

approaches to spectatorship and ethics, it concludes by exploring the effects that the film's portrayal of childhood has on the ideological and emotional involvement of viewers, thus questioning the value of the empathetic spectatorial position created by the film.

Introduction

In a very brief scene of Chloé Zhao's debut feature *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015a), 17-year-old Johnny Winters (John Reddy) enters a house—unseen in the film thus far—and delivers a pack of beers that he has smuggled into South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation (Zhao 2015a, 00:33:34 to 00:33:54). Johnny has got involved in the smuggling business temporarily in order to save money and be able to move to Los Angeles with his girlfriend. As he enters this house, the weeping of a child pervades the soundtrack, and a quick point-of-view panning shot shows a drunk woman lying on a sofa, surrounded by three small children she is not paying attention to. The youngest of them, visibly helpless, is the one in tears. Without saying a word—the baby's cry remains the only element of the soundscape—Johnny delivers the beers, gets the money from the woman, and leaves. In what seems to be a tangential scene for the film, the destructive consequences of alcohol consumption for the Lakota community are conveyed through the loud crying of a small child.

Johnny and her young sister Jashaun (Jashaun St. John), the co-protagonist of the film, live in a small house at the Reservation with their alcoholic mother Lisa

(Irene Bedard). Their eldest brother Cody is in prison and their cowboy father—whom they barely know, as he had nine different wives and 25 children in the reservation—dies in a fire near the beginning of the film. With the members of the family either dead, drunk, or absent, Johnny and Jashaun have developed a strong bond, and they lean on each other to deal with the harsh living conditions on Pine Ridge. Yet, as Jashaun learns about Johnny's plans to move to Los Angeles, the film deals with how each of the siblings, on separate paths, adjusts to the new situation, negotiating in the process their sense of belonging to the reservation. While on one of his alcohol runs, Johnny is beaten up by a rival gang and, after an offer from his half-brother George (George Dull Knife) to work with him in a garage, he gets back on the right track and decides to stay in the reservation. As for Jashaun, she engages on a search for companionship within the Lakota community.

This chapter deals with how the vulnerability of children, often reduced to victimizing scenes as that of the baby crying, is represented, used (and sometimes abused) in cinema. It focuses on Jashaun's storyline over Johnny's, in pre-adolescent childhood rather than adolescence, because it contends that childhood is a particularly productive vehicle for the exploration of vulnerability in both its situational and inherent dimensions (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, 2014). By bringing together film analysis, childhood studies, and theorizations of vulnerability, it questions the pre-conceived identification of children with helplessness, and thus explores

alternative accounts of a child's vulnerability. It analyzes *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* as a movie that acknowledges the potential of vulnerability as a source of resistance. The film foregrounds children's increased openness to the material and social relations around them, thus turning them into embodiments of the relational dimension of vulnerability (Butler 2020). Through the path of its main child character, Jashaun, it ultimately contends that vulnerability translates into actual change only when approached as a collective condition. Prompted to hold an ethically empathetic spectatorial position, viewers are given the chance to embrace the potential of human vulnerability through the eyes of the child.

Vulnerable Children in Social Realism

Childhood has been at the center of social realist-oriented cinema for over a century now. In films as varied as *The Kid* (Chaplin 1921), *Ladri di biciclette* (De Sica 1948), *Cidade de Deus* (Meirelles and Lund 2002), or *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008), children are the ones that suffer the consequences of social inequality the most. Although different in the context each describes, these films seem to respond to a similar logic. In them, suffering children are seen to be the perfect vehicle to raise concerns over a social issue. Associated to ideas of innocence, purity, and weakness, children are perceived as archetypal victims of the ills of society, as the ones most in need of protection from the State. "Whether because we take responsibility for the child or because we project our own remembered childishness onto the protagonist,"

children work to sharpen the emotional impact and identification of audience (Donald, Wilson, and Wright 2017, 3). As Patricia Holland (2004) argues, whenever children happen to reveal their vulnerability, spectators feel the need to protect them (143). The more engagement on the part of audiences, the more attention to the social conditions tackled by the film.

This logic rests on pre-established conventions of what it means to be a child and on how childhood is constructed in cultural and cinematic terms. For Karen Lury (2010a), cinematic children are envisioned by adults as an Other that holds many of the values lacking in adults. While grown-ups are supposed to be rational, self-sufficient, and potentially corrupt, children are constructed as irrational, pure, and helpless. In this binary logic, the child is understood as a universally appealing figure. As Deborah Martin (2019) argues, it is "a repository of innocence, authenticity, and unmediated experience" that ignores the rules and codes of the adult world (71–72). Far from a recent construction, this trope can be traced back to Romantic thought, and in particular to Jean Jacques Rousseau's idea that innate, natural innocence is spoiled by civilization. If the *natural* man, as Rousseau claims, is essentially good, then the child is thought to be born with this inherent innocence, but only to lose it as it gets in touch with the civilized, spoiled world (Rose 1984).

Viewing children as "angelic, innocent, and untainted by the world which they have recently entered" often leads to thinking that they are passive victims to be pitied

(Jenks 2005, 64). When marginal children—vulnerable both in terms of age and social condition—are represented in films, such approach runs the risk of turning them into objects for the emotional catharsis of viewers. Spectators consider their responsibility toward injustice to be fulfilled by the mere act of watching the film. As they are moved by the innocence of child characters, viewers use the film to feel better about themselves, but they fail to actually engage with the situation of children on screen. While Adriana Dancus, Mats Hyvönen, and Maria Karlsson (2020) argue that some "spectacles of vulnerability call for compassionate responses that erase the power mechanisms that produce vulnerability in the first place," compassionate responses rather block any actual engagement with those power mechanisms that produce vulnerability (4). By objectifying the child as victim, most films turn away the attention from the systemic factors creating that situation.

Ethical concerns over this specific use of childhood have been central to scholarship on cinematic children. Different authors have drawn attention to alternative ways in which the vulnerability of marginal children is dealt with. André Bazin (1997) already hinted at this fact when he criticized certain films' tendency to, in his own words, "anthropomorphize" the child, that is, to "treat childhood as if it were open to our understanding and empathy" (121). In his view, this "sentimental sympathy" (123) was to be replaced by a true psychological realism—as the one in Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (1948), he claims—that did not force

viewers to project their emotions upon child characters. More recently, other scholars have explored further possibilities for an ethical approach to children on the margins. Emma Wilson (2005) has argued for the value of emotion, conveyed through an aesthetics of child subjectivity, as a viable form to bridge the distance between spectators and the suffering of children. Sharing this positive view of emotion, Lury (2010b) has explored the affective dimension of non-Western children's relationship with the land, and how it might bring about a more empathetic response from viewers. In a different register, Martin (2019) has dealt with the representation of child death, and how an off-screen, visually elusive death—as the one taking place in *La mujer sin cabeza* (Martel 2008)—might disrupt adult spectatorial subjectivity.

These contributions criticize the use of marginalized children to manipulate the emotional engagement of spectators, at the same time as they draw attention to alternative ways of approaching childhood in film. However, they do not interrogate the notion of vulnerability *per se*. Even when they do recognize the agency of children as full subjects beyond victimhood (Lury 2010b; Martin 2019), they never completely separate from a restrictive view of vulnerability, one which identifies it with helplessness and disadvantage. This way, they fail to acknowledge the recent scholarly discussion of vulnerability as inherent to humanity—although unequally distributed—and thus a potential force of resistance (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016). This chapter seeks to fill that gap by applying renewed understandings of

vulnerability to the study of cinematic children. It adopts the ambivalent nature of vulnerability, both shared and asymmetrical (Hirsch 2016), as a framework to explore the cinematic representations of children on the margins. With attention to Chloé Zhao's (2015a) debut *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, it examines the ways in which cinema can foreground the dynamic possibilities of vulnerability—understood as radical openness towards others and as interconnectedness (Gilson 2014)—through child characters. It contends that children's ability to engage with the material and social relations around them is put forward by Zhao's film as a form of embodied resistance to a precarious situation. In the links established by the main child character—11-year-old Jashaun—with different members from her community, vulnerability is revealed to be a shared experience rather than an individual one. Crucially, this shift involves a different positioning of the audience: rather than paternalistic witnesses of social injustice, viewers are shaped as empathetic partners.

Children's Openness and Collective Resistance

Songs My Brothers Taught Me is the result of the four years that Chloé Zhao, born in China but based in the United States (US), spent getting to know the people at the Pine Ridge Reservation. Her approach to the story blends documentary and fiction. As she acknowledges in the pressbook of the film (2015b), she went into production without a closed script, and was then able to incorporate real-life events into the narrative as they occurred. This tendency toward a certain ethnographic realism,

which sets itself in opposition to mainstream films, links her work with that of other transnational filmmakers like Italian-born, Texas-based Roberto Minervini's (2013) *Stop the Pounding Heart* or US-born, Italy-based Jonas Carpignano's (2017) *A Ciambra*. The three films navigate the contact zone between fictional and documentary modes of storytelling, build low-key narratives, and use non-professional actors that often play themselves. They also use isolated, marginal communities as their subject matter: an Indian reservation in *Songs*, Christian fundamentalist farmers in *Stop the Pounding Heart*, and Calabrian Romani minorities in *A Ciambra*. Most crucially, all feature child and adolescent protagonists that work as a point of entry to the communities represented and, in their vulnerability, appeal to the sympathy of spectators.

In *Songs*, childhood (Jashaun) and adolescence (Johnny) are at the center of the film. Children and teenagers are the most vulnerable within the already vulnerable community of the Native American reservation. Marginalized in ethnic terms, Native Americans also endure harsh problems with alcoholism, unemployment, and lack of opportunities. Yet, vulnerability is arguably more pronounced in pre-adolescent children than in teenagers. This is clearly the case when vulnerability is thought of as a "susceptibility of particular persons or groups to specific kinds of harm or threat by others," which Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2014) refer to as *situational* vulnerability (8). Children are younger in terms of age, smaller in size,

and less mature; therefore, they are more likely to be affected by harm. In Jashaun's case, her situation is deemed as particularly vulnerable because of her family context—the complete absence of parental guide—and the fact that, unlike Johnny, she cannot escape from it because of her short age. Like the child desperately crying while unattended by his drunk mother in the scene that opens this chapter, she is a victim of a community ravaged by inequality, marginalization, and alcoholism. Adults, shadowy figures in the film, are barely present and completely detached from the lives of the younger generation.

However, vulnerability is envisioned in this chapter as both situational and inherent; asymmetrically distributed but shared by all humans. As Marianne Hirsch (2016) points out, "we share a common vulnerability emerging from the condition of living in bodies and in time" (80). Every person, for the mere fact of having a body and living in society, is vulnerable to the actions of others, in both positive and negative ways. Vulnerability thus is equated to openness; and to be vulnerable is "to be open to being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control" (Gilson 2014, 2). In this sense, children cannot be said to be more or less vulnerable than other people. As all human beings, they are inextricably bound to the world around and are vulnerable as a result. Still, when childhood is constructed in terms of openness, children—unlike adolescents—emerge as particularly suited to render this inherent dimension of vulnerability. Their form of experiencing the world—more open to

material and social relations—turns them into perfect vehicles to explore ontological vulnerability. This is the case of Jashaun in *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. In her search for solace once she knows of Johnny's plans, she attempts to bond with her community in different ways: through the material traces of her dead father first, with ex-convict Travis (Travis Lone Hill) later, and finally, with the people of her own generation. In the process, she opens herself up to others and to the world around her, showcasing how human vulnerability can be a force of productive change.

The morning after her father's funeral, at dawn, Jashaun visits the remains of the house where he was killed in a fire. Although she barely knew him, she seeks to bond with his memory through the material traces left in the house. In tears, wearing a denim jacket that belonged to him, she walks through the ashes and collects different objects—an old knife, documents from a box—that have not been burnt by the fire (Zhao 2015a, 00:15:53 to 00:17:10). Shot hand-held, the scene follows the child as she wanders around, framing her in low-angle close-ups, often in shallow focus. The camera stays close to her face, and to the emotions triggered by the moment, but it also films her hands in close-up while she searches through the ashes. Children, as already highlighted by scholars, have a distinct mode of experiencing reality that is shaped by embodiment (i.e., Lury 2010a; Martin 2019; Randall 2017). Unlike adults, they feel and sense things in a way that foregrounds the interaction with what is around. In other words, they perceive reality in a way that emphasizes their openness

to the outer world. In cinematic terms, this embodied perspective is often rendered through tactile or haptic images. Jashaun's walk through the ashes, drawing on this distinct ability of children, is also articulated in terms of embodiment. The hand-held camerawork, as it moves along with the character, foregrounds a sense of the child's body in contact with the outer world. The use of tactile images, of her hands picking up memories among the ruins, intensifies the idea of embodiment; and crucially, it presents the experience of Jashaun as one of sensorial openness to the reality she faces. If read from the perspective of vulnerability, the scene displays Jashaun's distinct ability to open herself to the world around her. Although unconsciously, she somehow embraces her vulnerability as a human being and uses it to bond with her father—or rather, with the remains of a father she did not get to know.

Jashaun's second attempt to bond with someone from the reservation is her relationship with Travis. Travis is an ex-convict, drug addict, and alcoholic trying to get back on his feet by selling hand-made clothing that he designs. Jashaun offers to help him with the improvised business accounts, in exchange for a hand-made dress for a tribal celebration. As they work and spend time together, friendship bonds grow between them. Children, inasmuch as they lack the prejudices that adults have, are often portrayed as more open toward difference, and more ready to overcome social barriers. Jashaun's relationship with Travis, a social outcast and much older than her, clearly draws on this notion. She is shown to be more able to engage with the Other,

to establish links with the people around her. In other words, she (unconsciously) acts upon a vision of humans as "vulnerable and as essentially dependent on others" (Ganteau 2015, 5). If, in the burnt house scene, she displayed a heightened openness to the material world around, her link to Travis foregrounds a distinct openness toward people. In a way, she shows an innate awareness of what Judith Butler (2016) calls "the social and material relations" that define life and that shape bodily vulnerability (16). In her childlike form of bonding with Travis, Jashaun encapsulates the interdependent and relational nature of vulnerability.

However, Travis is eventually sent back to prison after a fight and Jashaun finds herself alone again, without any adult figure to look up to. Neither the memory of her father nor her friendship with Travis manages to provide any solid attachment to the community. Although her engagement with the outer world and with others underlines the potential of vulnerability, it does not translate into any factual improvement on her isolation within the reservation. She renders visible the material and social relations that conform human existence, but she does not actually unlock the "sites of resistance that are opened up by vulnerability" (Butler 2020, 192). In her individual relationships with adults, vulnerability does not lead to any change.

Jashaun then turns her look away from adults and toward the people of her own generation. Right after she finds out that Travis is in jail, she bikes to a rodeo nearby (Zhao 2015a, 01:07:20 to 01:12:35). The scene starts in a gloomy tone. The

clouds in the sky, together with the dull lighting and a sad non-diegetic piano tune playing in the soundtrack, somehow echo her feelings of discomfort and loneliness. Low-angle long shots of her, surrounded by horse riders unaware of her presence, emphasize her sense of isolation. But as soon as the rodeo starts and she finds her half-brother Kevin, the mood of the scene changes. The sun comes out in the sky, and the soundtrack shifts to a lively country song while Kevin shows her around the rodeo. Jashaun is comforted by the presence of Kevin. They engage in a productive conversation about their father, in which they express a shared emptiness created by his absence. Once Kevin leaves to bull ride, Jashaun joins a group of children, gathered around as one of them plays a guitar tune. The moving song takes over the soundtrack, while the film intercuts shallow focus close-ups of the audience: children and adolescents, a soft wind blowing on their faces, all sharing this moment of communion around the music.

The rodeo sequence is a turning point is Jashaun's search for solace in the community. She again displays a heightened ability to bond with others—Kevin and the children at the rodeo—but this time her disposition does translate into a fruitful encounter. Among the people of her generation, as emphasized by the aesthetics described above, she finds her place in the world. Young people at the reservation are presented as a community instead of as isolated individuals. They help each other out—Kevin comforts Jashaun, Johnny is offered a job at the garage by George, and

they all gather to play music—while adults are shown to be unable to solve problems. They might be the most vulnerable members of an already vulnerable social group, but they embrace this vulnerability as a chance to engage with others, rather than as an entirely negative condition.

According to Butler (2020), individualism "fails to capture the condition of vulnerability, exposure, even dependency, that is presupposed by the right [to persist]" (198). The right to live, granted by "conditions for bodily persistence" (198), is to be found in the social rather than the individual, in the relations that give way to the social fabric of the world. As emerges from the rodeo scene, once they become a community, children and adolescents in the film are endowed with the ability to transform vulnerability into a productive force. Through the character of Jashaun, they are shown to be more open to the material and social relations around them, but this ability only translates into actual change when approached as a collective condition. Being vulnerable is still troubling, but human dependency associated with it is no longer a problem since it becomes a source of agency and reaction. Freed from its association with passivity, vulnerability becomes "a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time" (Butler 2016, 24), as it allows Jashaun to find a fertile attachment to her culture. By highlighting the collective nature of vulnerability, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* presents children's vulnerability as a potential force of resistance.

Johnny's final voice-over monologue encapsulates this idea. In a montage sequence that juxtaposes different images of communal life in the reservation—Johnny and his friends riding horses, Jashaun in a tribal festivity wearing the dress designed by Travis, and Johnny and Jashaun riding a bike together—Johnny argues:

> Where we live, the Plains, the Badlands, things usually look the same. […] It's always a hard place to leave. 'Cause that's all you got growing up. My sister, Jashaun, she's got a thing about this place. She sees things I don't. She's a good one. Whenever the storms are coming, the old timers would teach us to watch the cloud. And when the wind is too strong, we all know how to lean into it so it don't blow us away.
>
> (Zhao 2015, 01:28:00 to 01:30:22)

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is presented as a harsh place you get tired of. It is somewhere stuck in time, where opportunities are very limited as you grow up and which turns its inhabitants into vulnerable subjects, even more so in the case of children. Amidst this widespread sense of vulnerability, Jashaun stands out as an exception. As argued above, it is her condition as a child that is endowed with an increased ability to engage with her material and social surroundings, to see things that others don't. She is more vulnerable in the traditional sense of the word, but she

is also more aware of her inherent vulnerability. However, the key to turn this ability into resistance—against the harsh landscape, poverty, crime, and alcoholism—lies in communal effort, in the songs sang together and the ability that all children hold to lean into the wind so it does not blow them away. Vulnerability understood as a collective experience, one that unites Jashaun with the young people of the reservation, will protect them all from the wind blow.

Childhood, Spectatorship, and the Other

The inclusion of children in films, especially in social realist-oriented cinema, always involves a power imbalance between the child Other and the adult viewer. These films inevitably confront an asymmetry between their low-class child subjects and the (very often) middle-class audiences that they are most likely oriented to. Therefore, spectatorship is a crucial concern in the critical engagement with cinematic children, and with how to address their situation from an ethical point of view. Audience positioning is at the heart of all the academic accounts of alternative approaches to childhood vulnerability on screen mentioned above. When Bazin (1997) criticizes the depiction of childhood "as if it were open to our understanding" (121), his main concern is about the ethical implications of projecting adult anxieties into the child figure. Influenced by models of embodied spectatorship (i.e., Marks 2000; Shaviro 1993), both Wilson (2005) and Lury (2010b) explore the potential of certain child bodily aesthetics to foster an ethical and empathetic response on the part of audiences.

In her discussion of child death in *La mujer sin cabeza*, Martin (2019) centers on the ways in which the film might subvert spectatorial subjectivity. Ultimately, these contributions explore a more ethical way for audiences to engage with vulnerable children on screen.

The notion of empathy runs through many of these discussions on ethics in the encounter with the child as Other. In her influential work on prosthetic memory, in which she stresses cinema's ability to generate empathy, Alison Landsberg (2004) defines empathy in opposition to the similar—but actually opposite—notion of sympathy. For Landsberg, sympathy is an essentialist kind of identification that assumes initial likeness between subjects, while empathy acknowledges and respects alterity. While sympathy implies condescension, "for the sympathizer looks down at her object and in the process reaffirms her superiority," empathy is "a way of both feeling for and feeling different from the subject of inquiry" (135). When critics champion films that create an ethically empathetic position for audiences, they mean that spectators are triggered to negotiate the difference with the Other, rather than collapsing it into sympathetic identification. Empathetic spectatorship can be achieved in different ways: for some scholars it is through affect and emotion, for others it is through disruption, uncertainty, and illegibility.[1] In the case of *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, it is through the recognition and celebration of a shared, collective vulnerability. In the following, I explore how the film manages to render this sense of

collective vulnerability into an ethically empathetic spectatorial position in aesthetic and narrative terms.

The film's positioning of the audience is shaped by the choice to always cling to Jashaun's point of view. Although the film oscillates between Johnny's storyline and Jashaun's, whenever she is onscreen, she holds the gaze, thus becoming the film's main internal focalizer. In the scene where the family learns of the father's death (Zhao 2015a, 00:09:43 to 00:10:20), Johnny, Jashaun, and their mother are at home when the police officer arrives to bring the bad news. The scene opens with two brief shots of Johnny fixing his truck, but soon cuts to a shot of Jashaun visibly concerned while looking off-screen. Next, Jashaun's silhouette, shown from the back, takes up most of the screen as she looks at her mother and the police officer talking outside. By means of an internal focalization visibly enhanced by backlighting, viewers share Jashaun's point of view while the policeman breaks the news for Lisa. The film then cuts to a quick shot/reverse shot pattern of Lisa and the officer outside the house. In the two shots in which Jashaun's mother is onscreen, the door behind which Jashaun is silently watching the conversation remains at the center of the frame, emphasizing Jashaun's presence even when she is not seen. To close the scene, the film goes back to the two shots of Jashaun mentioned above: a close-up of her looking off-screen and the shot of her silhouette in the shadows looking through the door's glass pane. The girl, in a very childlike gesture, eavesdrops and looks without being noticed in further

scenes from the film. That is how she learns of Johnny's plan to move to Los Angeles with his girlfriend, how she finds about her mother sleeping with a man after a drinking night, or how she spies on Johnny and Aurelia during a football match. In these moments, she becomes the agent of the look. What prevails in these scenes is her—usually very subdued—reaction to the events she is looking at. The film refuses to grant an external view of her as the object of an adult gaze that the spectator might align with. On the contrary, it remains faithful to the child's perspective all the way through.

This choice situates audiences in relation to Jashaun's twofold vulnerability. She goes through certain situations that are objectively threatening for an 11-year-old child in physical and emotional ways: the death of her father; her constant, unsupervised wandering around the reservation; and her everyday contact with alcohol and drugs. The film could have underlined her situational vulnerability as a Native American female child in those cases by providing an external position to audiences. This would have turned *alignment* with Jashaun's point of view into what Murray Smith (1995) terms as *allegiance*: "to marshal our sympathies for or against the various characters in the world of the fiction" in order to increase the emotional engagement with the story (6). Yet, this vision of children as fragile and helpless is often that of adults. The perception of their own vulnerability might be different for children themselves, who do not see the world through the same lens. The film,

accordingly, respects Jashaun's lack of concern over her vulnerability. By aligning audiences with her point of view, they are never put into the position of worrying about an imminent risk to Jashaun's physical safety, nor does the film exploit her emotional suffering. Instead, they are invited to engage with her journey of openness towards the material and social relations around her. Her heightened awareness of inherent vulnerability is prioritized over her situational vulnerability. In other words, audiences are given the chance to embrace the potential of human vulnerability through the eyes of a child. Fidelity to Jashaun's point of view allows the inherent dimension of vulnerability to take center stage over the child's situational vulnerability and frustrates any attempt from audiences to perceive her—and other children—as mere victims to be pitied at.

Although the film manages to avoid the exploitation of child suffering, this empathetic audience positioning is not unproblematic. In her exploration of the ethics of watching death on screen, Michele Aaron (2014) criticizes Landsberg's notion of empathy and the subsequent work on empathetic spectatorship. Aaron considers that in a truly ethical position "the spectator is implicated in, impacted by, and responsible for the suffering and vulnerability of the other being watched without—and this is crucial—collapsing that understanding into solipsistic reassurances or discourse" (161–162). For her, empathy—although in a more delayed, less straightforward way than sympathy—remains solipsistic because it co-opts the experience of the subaltern

through its fictionalization. The kind of spectatorial position offered by *Songs*, the ways in which it uses the child as a "pure form to be inhabited" (Castañeda 2002, 147) by adult audiences, might still struggle to bridge the power inequalities it is based upon.

The film's racial dynamics can also be problematic from the point of view of spectatorship. Behn Zeitlin's (2012) *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which deals with the consequences of climate destruction through the eyes of a six-year-old African American girl, is a widely discussed example that might be of use. Alysse Knox-Russell (2018) criticizes the film because of the way in which "the burden of familial and cultural loss and the need to develop respectful approaches to engagement with the nonhuman falls upon the shoulders of a child both black and poor" (229). That is, although the use of a child's perspective fosters an empathetic response on the part of audience, at the same time it places the responsibility on a marginalized and racially othered child. Similarly, in *Songs*, the burden of developing an ethical approach to our shared vulnerability (in order to live through structural social and racial inequality) falls upon the shoulders of a Native American female child and, more broadly, those of the young generation of the reservation. They are an example of vulnerability's potential for resistance which audiences can draw from. But in such a move, their racialized experience of marginalization is co-opted by viewers. Their role as embodiments of inherent vulnerability runs the risk of fading the racial and social

inequalities that put them there in the first place. Although the film is indeed valuable in its approach to childhood and vulnerability, it remains a partially troubling representation of vulnerable children in ethical terms.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the implications of representing childhood vulnerability in film in *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. Beyond a straightforward association of children with helplessness, the film negotiates the dynamic possibilities of vulnerability through Jashaun's search for a place within her Native American community. It uses the child figure, in its increased ability to bond with others and to be open to the world around, as an embodiment of the potential of human vulnerability. This potential, materialized only when vulnerability is assumed as a collective condition, emerges as both a source of resistance for the child characters and a model of ethical coexistence for audiences. Yet, the empathetic spectatorial position that the film creates remains troubling in its collapsing of Native American experience through fiction and its erasure of racial specificity.

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[1] On the value of affect and emotion for an empathetic spectatorship in films featuring children, see Lury (2010b), Sutton (2005), and Wilson (2005). On the value of disruption and uncertainty for an empathetic spectatorship, see Eleftheriotis (2016), Martin (2019), and Stacey (2015).