

Traveling Bodies Exposed: Vulnerability, Embodied Experience, and Travel Literature

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Travel and travel narratives are deeply shaped by the social, physical, and existential vulnerability of the traveler and the traveling body. Fatigue, illness, injury, fear, sensory overload, and the loss of bodily control accompany travel as ordinary rather than exceptional experiences. (Wrigley and Revill 2002; Wassler and Kuteynikova 2020) Encounters with unfamiliar climates, infrastructures, medical systems, and bodily norms confront travelers with the fragility of corporeal integrity and frequently destabilize self-perception and identity. (Ahmed 2004) In this sense, vulnerability is not an abstract condition but a lived, bodily experience, grounded in what has been described as the noneliminable aspect of embodied existence. (Harrison 2008) Travel foregrounds this condition in a specific way: movement through unfamiliar environments or so-called 'extreme' forms of travel (Burroughs 2019) demand heightened bodily attention, render agency precarious, and reveal the body as a vulnerable medium of experience, perception, and narration. Travel writing thus provides a privileged site for examining how vulnerability becomes narratable, and where it resists narration.

This conference focuses on vulnerability as a key concept for rethinking travel literature and traveling bodies. We understand vulnerability not merely as an attribute of specific individuals or social groups, but as an ontological condition of an embodied being, intensified and made manifest through practices of mobility. At the same time, vulnerability is unevenly distributed, highly gendered, and shaped by cultural, historical, political, economic, and social conditions (Butler 2004). As critical scholarship has shown, the attribution of vulnerability can reaffirm power asymmetries and even constitute a form of epistemic violence (Lorenz 2018), particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts. (Howell 2014) Travel literature, therefore, negotiates tensions between exposure and agency, risk and vitality, care and endangerment, resilience and breakdown.

Drawing on approaches from literary studies, affect theory, phenomenology, body studies, postcolonial studies, disability studies, tourist studies, and mobility studies, the

conference invites contributions that examine how travel texts articulate, stage, negotiate, or hide the bodily vulnerability of the traveler as well as the ‘travelee’, including the physical, psychological, and social consequences and effects for the narrative. Rather than focusing exclusively on travelers conventionally labeled as “vulnerable,” we also explicitly welcome analyses that explore vulnerability as a fundamental human, situational, and experiential condition of traveling itself, including moments in which bodily integrity, mobility, or narrative authority are troubled, lost, or reconfigured. Interdisciplinary perspectives are warmly welcomed; we especially encourage submissions from early-career scholars. The conference is organized by the Research Center “Body Cultures in Motion (BOCULT)” at Ghent University and the “Koblenz Research Unit: Body • Travel • Literature”.

Submission Details

- **Abstract length:** 250–300 words
- **Submission deadline:** July 1, 2026
- **Notification of acceptance:** September 1, 2026
- **Conference date and location:** November 27, 2026, Ghent University, Belgium

Please send your abstract and a short bio note to the following e-mail addresses:

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