

# **BECOMING A “VULNERABLE SENIOR” IN THE DAYS OF COVID-19**

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## **I. THE FIGURE OF THE VULNERABLE SENIOR**

In the Netherlands, the beginning of the coronavirus crisis was marked by a new figure of public discourse: the vulnerable senior. Heeding the advice of public health experts, the government and the media repeatedly called on the public to “protect our elderly” and advised older people to stay at home. While certainly well-intentioned, these calls have come with problematic generalizations. In a culture steeped in ageism, the figure of the vulnerable senior runs the risk of reinforcing the association of old age with frailty and weakness.

The evocations of the vulnerable senior were part of an overall strategy to impose an “intelligent lockdown” on the country that would be more selective and lenient than the measures adopted in other parts of Europe. The aim of the intelligent lockdown was to shield vulnerable populations while at the same time allowing the virus to steadily spread across the least vulnerable groups. Yet, this attempt to establish “herd immunity” was quickly abandoned as ICU beds filled up and the long-term effects of COVID-19 became apparent. Older people experienced this early phase of the coronavirus crisis with mixed feelings. A well-funded pension system and other welfare provisions ensured that most of them emerged from the crisis without great economic losses. As in other countries, however, social isolation was and remains an issue, as were the high mortality rates in nursing homes.

In this paper, we investigate the figure of the vulnerable senior by mapping the ways in which vulnerability is constructed and experienced. Our interest in the concept of vulnerability reflects a powerful current in public and academic debates.<sup>1</sup> Vulnerability plays a prominent role in feminist ethics, where it is understood as a “universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition” (Fineman 2008).<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler’s (2004; 2009) work on vulnerability and precarity has opened up new vistas by highlighting the moral and political implications of embodiment. But while Butler’s ethics is firmly grounded in an ontology of vulnerability, she has grown weary of the use of vulnerability in political discourse—a matter that we will discuss in more detail below.

To approach the figure of the vulnerable senior, we combined an empirical study with philosophical reflection. Collecting and analysing quotes from daily newspapers and other media, we found multiple ways in which vulnerability is constructed and experienced. We then interpreted these different senses of vulnerability by drawing on phenomenological and post-structuralist sources. This combination of various research techniques has allowed us to see the figure of the vulnerable senior as a multi-layered phenomenon. The quotes we collected were deliberately hybrid, situated both in an ongoing media discourse and expressive of personal experience. Initially, we considered how, in these data, the vulnerable senior is constructed discursively: which assumptions are at play in the discourse and which images of old age does the discourse project?<sup>3</sup> In the next step of our interpretation, we asked how the figure of the vulnerable senior relates to lived experience: how do concrete subjects encounter the label of vulnerability that the discourse imposes on them? How do they make sense of their new situation? It is this attention to the entanglement of discourse and lived experience, this probing into the “quasi-transcendental” structure of experience, that situates our research in the broader field of critical phenomenology (Guenther 2020, 12).

## II. METHOD

### Data Collection

This paper starts from the discourse around vulnerability as it unfolded in a number of Dutch newspapers. Our data set consisted of newspaper articles and online comments that span the period between March and November 2020. We initially searched for articles in the databases of the Dutch newspapers *NRC*, *Volkskrant*, *Parool*, *Trouw*, and the

<sup>1</sup> Google Trends shows that globally search queries using the term “vulnerable” have steadily increased since 2004; unsurprisingly, there is a dramatic peak of such searches in March 2020 when the coronavirus crisis hit the English-speaking world. For an overview of the usages of vulnerability in different disciplines, see Wisner (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of feminist approaches to the ethics of vulnerability, see Mackenzie et al. (2014).

<sup>3</sup> By “discourse,” we mean the totality of socially, culturally, and historically situated sense-making practices that involve the usage of signs (Blommaert 2005). Discourses, on our understanding, do not

*Correspondent*, and the journal *Medisch Contact*. We then screened and selected articles that included the terms “coronavirus,” “vulnerability” (*kwetsbaarheid*), and “elderly” (*ouderen*) in the title, header, or sub-header. Additional articles and texts from other sources (i.e., comments on video-broadcasting websites) were selected through snowball sampling. To be included in the sample, articles needed to address the vulnerability of older people in the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the articles needed to include narrative elements, as found in opinion pieces and reportages with extensive quotes.

## Data Analysis

We analysed the data using the Thematic Analysis method (Braun & Clarke 2006). Data collection and data analysis were conducted simultaneously. A bottom-up approach was used, meaning that codes were derived from the data instead of using a pre-existing code sheet. During the initial coding of the texts, we identified overlapping, recurring, and common topics and searched for quotes that illustrate them. In the second phase, we identified themes that emerged from these topics and quotes.

A total of twenty-five articles from eight different databases were included in the analysis. Below, we have outlined how the quotes from the different articles—each of which are numbered Rn—support the philosophical analysis of the phenomenology of vulnerability and old age during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### III. THREE GUISES OF VULNERABILITY

Collecting and analysing articles from the mentioned Dutch newspapers, we were able to distill a number of patterns in the way that vulnerability appeared. We have distinguished three main forms that we further elucidated by drawing on philosophical concepts from post-structuralist and phenomenological sources:

1. Vulnerability as discursive effect: political and social forces label the bodies of older people as vulnerable. We further explain this labelling effect by turning to a recent article by Judith Butler (2021) in which she discusses the consequences of labelling certain groups as “vulnerable.”

simply impose ready-made identities but co-constitute a subject’s field of possibilities. Together with other motivating forces, then, the discourse around vulnerability organises lived experience; it brings certain possibilities to the foreground while obscuring others. In this respect, our approach is inspired by Husserl’s (2009) understanding of phenomenology as a science of possibilities.

<sup>4</sup> We roughly defined “older people” as adults above the age of 65, which is in line with the definition used by the American Psychological Association (2014).

2. Vulnerability as unrealizable: vulnerability enters people’s lives as an external reality, a fact about their bodies that they do not experience as such. We use Jean-Paul Sartre’s (2003) and Simone de Beauvoir’s (1996) notion of the “unrealizable” to elucidate this experience of being named with a name that remains foreign to you.
3. Vulnerability as creative appropriation: even though “vulnerability” may be imposed from the outside, those who are named as vulnerable still need to make sense of this label. “Vulnerable seniors” assume their label in relative freedom; they challenge and deform it through the use of figurative language. In this section, we refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) distinction between the spoken word and the speaking word as well as to his notion of conditioned freedom.

## Vulnerability as Discursive Effect

### *Us versus Them*

In the first step of our analysis, we considered how the trope of the vulnerable senior was discursively constructed in the early stages of the coronavirus crisis. Based on our sources, we found that newspapers relied on particular assumptions and patterns of speech when referring to these alleged vulnerable seniors.

The assumptions and patterns of speech that we identified imply the disempowerment of those who come to be labelled as vulnerable seniors. Judith Butler (2021) describes the dynamics and the dangers of this disempowerment in a recent article, where she deals explicitly with the situations of refugees and Latin-American women who are the targets of *femicidio*. These groups find themselves in particular historical circumstances that render them vulnerable to violence. Yet these same circumstances also foster support, resistance, and networks of solidarity. To frame refugees and Latin-American women as vulnerable is to abstract from this reality in which counter-power and resistance feature heavily; it constitutes an act of naming that, on the one hand, designates who is in need of protection, but, on the other hand, risks effacing their agency. Butler associates this act of naming with humanitarian interventions and rights-based takes on politics. Though well intentioned, these approaches tend to treat marginalised groups as passive objects of care. Subsumed under an abstract notion of vulnerability, marginalised groups are being deprived of their power. “And this is a bind,” Butler writes, “since we call them vulnerable because they have been deprived of power” (2021, 181).

Butler’s account chimes with our analysis of the discourse around the vulnerable senior.<sup>5</sup> In our sources, “vulnerable seniors” were generally referred to as a homogenous group, whose precarious health condition sets them apart from the rest of society. Consider the following quote:

<sup>5</sup> Butler does not explicitly refer to older people, even though her insights hold for them as well. For Butler’s first take on the COVID-19 crisis, see her blog post “Capitalism Has Its Limits” (2020).

Rolling out a towel on a crowded beach? They [vulnerable people] can only dream of that. Visiting family or friends is already too much to ask sometimes, because just suppose they get infected.<sup>6</sup> [R25]

The speaker does not consider the possibility that vulnerability could manifest itself to varying degrees or in variable ways. On this view, vulnerability denotes a uniform identity with the group of vulnerable people appearing as discrete and closed. Through a series of collapsed identifications, the group of vulnerable people comes to coincide with the group of vulnerable seniors. This assumption of homogeneity is expressed through speech that pits vulnerable seniors against the rest of the population in the manner of us versus them.

The concrete position that a subject occupies across the us versus them divide depends on the perspective one adopts. “Non-vulnerable people” assume a we-identity that is built around the exclusion of the vulnerable minority, which not only affects older people but also immigrants, migrant workers, and people with disabilities and underlying health conditions. “Vulnerable seniors” themselves, on the other hand, construct the notion of “we” in a contrasting way, based on shared marginalization and the resentment against *those over there* who enjoy themselves at *our* expense. Consider this quote:

And then we have to stay inside so that the people above can enjoy their terraces and dinners. I think it is a disgrace that people even dared to say it. [R26]

Not everybody joined in on the antagonistic rhetoric, however. Certain commentators attempted to bridge the divide between “us” and “them” and advocated a softer attitude toward older people, in which they are cared for instead of set aside:

Call it a wry side effect, but at least the corona crisis is causing the vulnerable people of this world to be viewed with different eyes once again. Softer eyes. [R21]

The world turned out to be very different from what was often thought. It turned out that it was not about money, but about life, about protecting the weakest and most vulnerable, elderly people who no longer represented any economic benefit. [R19]

At the same time, a column by writer and media entrepreneur Marianne Zwagerman led to a fierce debate in the Dutch newspapers. In her column, she compared vulnerable seniors to “dry wood” that might as well be cut down to make room for “fresh twigs” to grow:

<sup>6</sup> For a complete list of original quotes and their sources, see appendix.

The dry wood is being cut down, perhaps a few months earlier than without the virus. Must everyone who is in the prime of life sacrifice everything for that? [R13]

It is evident that the figure of the vulnerable senior appeals to a politics of vulnerability. Like the refugees or Latin-American women to whom Butler refers, older people may be vulnerable in one particular respect, but that does not remove their agency in other areas of life. The figure of the vulnerable senior, however, occludes this messy reality. It subsumes people above a certain age under a uniform identity associated with victimhood and passivity. The disregard for diversity and intra-group differences was underlined by the emergence of two distinct camps—the vulnerable and the invulnerable—whose borders were policed by the rhetoric of us versus them.

As Butler’s (2021) analysis would suggest, the responses to the COVID-19 crisis have followed a paternalistic mindset. We can catch a glimpse of this in the more positive responses to the us versus them opposition, which, although well-intended, carry a distinctly patronizing tone. One consequence that Butler’s analysis did not include, however, was the re-appropriation of vulnerability enacted by Zwagerman. As the potentiality of being wounded, vulnerability does not only elicit care and concern; it can also carry the imagination to the opposite conclusion, resulting in a call to hurt, abandon, and sacrifice. This is another complication that should caution us against harnessing the label of vulnerability for progressive political ends, such as the protection of marginalized populations.

### *Labelling*

According to Butler (2021), vulnerability “is always contextual since it belongs to the organization of embodied and social relations.” Vulnerability, then, is not an individual disposition but rather a socially produced label that is assigned to people and assumed by them on the basis of their embodiment. In other words, vulnerability is relational:

Vulnerability is not a simply subjective state or disposition, but is always related to an object, a prospect, an impinging world (and for that, “intentional” in the phenomenological sense). Vulnerability might take the form of excitability, susceptibility, longing, delight, fear, anxiety, or dread, but whatever form it takes, it is already and from the start a relational predicament. (177)

Butler’s relational notion of vulnerability implies that “the body, perhaps precisely by virtue of its boundaries, is differentiated from and exposed to a material and social world that makes its own life and action possible” (191). This conception does not deny the physical body, but instead reflects on its social and political conditions of possibility.

Our sources echoed the idea of vulnerability as relational and discursive. “Vulnerable seniors” did not discuss their situation in terms of a bodily condition, but in terms of a new status or category. In the perception of both older and younger people, the COVID-19

pandemic gave rise to the distinctively new label of the vulnerable senior. Through the label, some people realized for the first time that they belong to the category of vulnerable people—something which had not occurred to them before the crisis. In other cases, the label added a new dimension to a condition that people already experienced as their own:

The coronavirus, and the policy around it, have made me realize that I clearly belong to a category. A category that has high priority in policies. [R2]

Recently, I got a new status: that of a “vulnerable senior.” Who must be protected. [R5]

Now I belong to a vulnerable group and I must say that I’ve missed the benefits of Corona so far. [R3]

As the second quote suggests, people did not suddenly realize they belong to a pre-existing category. Rather, the discourse around COVID-19 produced a wholly new group of people: vulnerable seniors. In line with Butler’s analysis, the vulnerability of the vulnerable senior does not so much pertain to a person’s bodily condition as it is an embodied expression of the social and political organization of which people are part.

“Vulnerable seniors” received their label also from the people in their environment. The way people talked about older people during the pandemic is an important aspect of vulnerability’s relationality, as the following quote illustrates:

Other people feel sorry for me when they hear about my heart condition. “How terrible for you.” But now I see the same people going to a crowded beach. They ignore the corona measures. [R12]

This person’s medical condition marks her as belonging to the group of people who are in need of special concern in the days of the pandemic. Yet, she resents the incoherent compassion of her environment.

While many experienced the label of the vulnerable senior as a new phenomenon, some were already well-acquainted with vulnerability:

You know what it is, I am extra vulnerable, but vulnerable people know that about themselves, don’t they? I’m always careful. Even with the flu I stay away from others. Actually, not much has changed for me with the current restrictions. [R10]

In sum, the label of the vulnerable senior was assigned to people on the basis of their age alone. Somebody’s bodily condition did not matter in the assignment, but it influenced the

way in which people responded to the label. People were surprised in cases where the label of the vulnerable senior disrupted their habitual self-image as healthy and independent. In other cases, people accepted the label as an expression of a bodily condition they already experienced as their own. It is in this sense that vulnerability is not so much “physical” as it denotes a relational and socio-political category.

### Vulnerability as Unrealizable

While construing vulnerability as relational, Butler does not specify what being labelled as such implies for a person’s self-experience. In this section, we aim at a phenomenological description of the experience of older people that are named as vulnerable. We argue that the label of the vulnerable senior, as it is used in the COVID-19 pandemic, can be understood in terms of what Sartre and Beauvoir call an “unrealizable.” In contrast to Butler’s approach, which addresses the way in which vulnerability is produced as a social and political label, Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s social phenomenology of the body addresses how such labels are experienced from a first-person perspective.

As the quotes above (R2, R3 and R5) illustrate, during the pandemic, some people felt overwhelmed by being labelled as vulnerable, which implied their sudden merging into a unified category: a group of endangered people in need of protection because of their age or health conditions. We have seen that for many people, being assigned this label was a new experience which marked a change in their self-images when compared to their previous ideas about themselves:

I need to get used to the last, now often mentioned, expression [vulnerable seniors]. [R1]

To capture this experience of being labelled from the outside by others, Sartre introduces the term “unrealizables” [*les irréalisables*] (2003, 548). This concept is also used by Simone de Beauvoir (1996) in *The Coming of Age* in order to describe the embodied experience of an older person. In aging, we need to accept a reality that is properly ours but that comes from outside and remains ungraspable for us. There is an indissoluble tension between our inner conviction that we remain who we always have been and the objective certainty of being considered old. This objective certainty, this unrealizable, forms the other side of our situation, according to Beauvoir.

The notion of situation as used by Beauvoir describes the particular way in which we are opened onto the world. It “encompasses both the objective and subjective aspects of experience” (Moi 1999, 68; Knowles 2019).<sup>7</sup> Unrealizables, however, are not part of a

<sup>7</sup> When Sartre argues that the body is a situation, his conception differs from that of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir. Sartre states that our bodily situation needs to be surpassed; my body is my past, an obstacle that is characteristic of my finitude. As such it is a contingent necessity that must be



person's situation.<sup>8</sup> Instead, unrealizables are "a reality that is certainly ourselves although it reaches us from the outside and although we cannot grasp it" (Beauvoir 1996, 320). Unrealizables can be explained as external labels that are assigned to us by others. The examples Sartre (2003) gives include being a Jew, Aryan, ugly, handsome, but also being a civil servant, teacher, waiter, in Paris, and funny (548). In all of these cases, we are dealing with real forms of existence with an obligatory nature: one cannot *not* relate to them. The unrealizables can be considered as the facts of who we are; we do not have an inner experience of them, and yet we *do* need to take an attitude towards them. Being *unrealizable*, these facts or labels cannot become the purpose of our actions. That does not mean, however, that we can simply ignore the outsider's perspective on who we are, as it is captured by the unrealizable. There is a sense in which we have to realize the outsider's perspective that confronts us, which leads to a paradox: the unrealizables are "revealed as *to be realized*," writes Sartre (2003), even though they cannot be realized (549; italics in original).

For Sartre, realization implies freedom. Freedom is not at stake in the cases where we only conceive of a *possible* end to our actions, but only if a real choice is involved.<sup>9</sup> Freedom involves realizing something new. In contrast, unrealizables are real forms of existence that we cannot realize in freedom. Sartre explains how they function:

We must be careful not to confuse them with the imaginary. We have to do with perfectly real existences; but those for which these characteristics are really *given are not* these characteristics, and I who *am* them can not realize them. (Sartre 2003, 548; italics in original)

The label of the "vulnerable senior" similarly is a real existence; in the first months of the pandemic, this label was assigned to older people and, as a consequence, they needed to realize the upshot of this label in the context of their lived reality. They had to do this even though some older people did not relate to the experience of "being a vulnerable senior," as we have seen in the quotes above. This label of the vulnerable senior and the danger of getting infected influences a person's activities and daily life, but it is not an end or a positive goal that a person realizes in freedom, as the following quotes illustrate:

Now I'm in exile in my caravan. With a beautiful view of the trees and the birds. It is very annoying though that I'm not with my children. [R22]

transcended by consciousness. In our reading of Sartre, we do not take over this rigid distinction between body and consciousness, yet we are interested in the way Sartre conceptualizes the body's existing for others. Our interpretation of situation is closer to Beauvoir's account. For Beauvoir, situation describes the particular way in which we are opened onto the world.

<sup>8</sup> See also Sartre (2003, 549): "they represent the reverse side of the situation."

<sup>9</sup> "We are free when the final term by which we make known to ourselves what we are is an end: that is, not a real existent like that which in the supposition that we have made could fulfil our wish, but an object which does not yet exist" (Sartre 2003, 504).

For me, the corona situation is a disaster. I’m anxious, everywhere I go. The doctors didn’t allow me to go to stores either. Too much risk, because of my age and my eye condition. [R4]

But not all people feel the same about their new circumstances:

Anxious? Thankfully not, I never really was. Life is life! A life as a hermit for fear of viral contamination? That’s much more of a fearful image to me. [R6]

These quotes convey that there are different ways in which people assume the label of the “vulnerable senior.” What remains constant, however, is the need to react to the new reality that emerged from the discourse around the coronavirus. Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s notion of the unrealizable helps us to understand that “vulnerable” is, and remains, a label assigned from the outside by others that is not part of the senior’s existential situation, but which still needs to be taken up and lived through by the ones to whom it is assigned.

### Vulnerability as Creative Appropriation

A striking feature of the discourse on “vulnerable seniors” is the abundance of figurative language. Throughout our analysis, we came across metaphors and analogies that offered particular interpretations of the coronavirus situation. Typically, speakers used stylized language to convey strong feelings or certain political messages. For instance, speakers who had lived through the Second World War tended to draw comparisons with that period of recent history. In analysing these figurative elements of discourse, we have relied on Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) distinction between the “spoken word” (*parole parlée*) and the “speaking word” (*parole parlante*). The spoken word denotes established words, expressions, and concepts, the meanings of which the speaker knows and reproduces habitually. The speaking word, by contrast, captures the creative use of language, which draws on established meaning to express something new.<sup>10</sup> While Merleau-Ponty tends to prioritise the speaking word in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the two sides of language receive more equal treatment in his later works. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) suggests that the spoken word and the speaking word are in fact reversible: that is to say, interdependent (Baldwin 2007). Just as established meaning goes back to acts of creation, creativity needs acquired material to work with.

<sup>10</sup> On an alternative reading, spoken and speaking speech do not refer to two different kinds of speech, but instead to two distinct moments of experience inherent in all language (Kee 2018).

### *War Analogies*

The war analogies made by “vulnerable seniors” showcase the intertwining of the spoken word and the speaking word. Consider the following examples:

You know what this reminds me of? People who told me about their hiding experiences. Of course, it’s not a war now, but they did say: “rhythm and structure, that’s important.” [R9]

Unprecedented how everything now lies flat, but the war was much worse . . . Personally, I’m not worried, this is also a time for reflection. [R11]

When discussing the lockdown, people of all ages repeatedly referenced the Second World War. This tendency was echoed by political leaders, whose reliance on martial rhetoric has often been noted.<sup>11</sup> In the Netherlands, the Second World War, together with the Shoah, is one of the darkest pages in recent history.<sup>12</sup> While the traumas of the War are most alive in older people, they have left a deep mark on the Dutch collective memory. This legacy was palpable in the repeated invocations of the “war on the coronavirus,” which established war as a hermeneutical master key used by many people in their personal interpretations of the crisis. In this light, narrations of wartime memories appear as examples of the spoken word: the reiteration of established meaning.

While war analogies thus belong to a repertoire of common expressions, they also express deeply personal experience. The speakers in the above examples tell stories of the War as a way to highlight the intensity of their present experience. There is an approximation between the War and the lockdown, even though the severity of the War ultimately remains unrivalled (as the second speaker contends). Through analogy, the War becomes a background against which the lockdown measures are interpreted. Thus, the present is transformed into something meaningful, a “time for reflection,” or the right moment to fall back on an old lesson: “rhythm and structure, that’s important.”

War analogies put the speakers’ perspectives in a broader historical context. By virtue of their war stories, older people are able to weigh the odds of the lockdown against past events that were in many respects more restricting and frightening. In this way, they present themselves as resourceful and knowledgeable rather than as victims of circumstance. Unwittingly perhaps, these speakers take a stance not only on the reality of the lockdown,

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Musu (2020); Westbrook (2020); Levenson (2020).

<sup>12</sup> During the Second World War, the Netherlands was invaded and placed under occupation by Nazi Germany—despite the country’s attempt to remain neutral. Shortly after, the Nazi regime started to persecute Jewish residents and in 1941 also started to deport them to concentration camps with the help of the Dutch police. The Netherlands had a substantial Jewish population at the time. Many were deported and were either killed upon arrival in the camps or died there subsequently. Apart from the horrors that the Jewish population had to endure, the occupied country itself was also afflicted by the war. Parts of the country and even some entire cities were bombed and destroyed.

but also on the reality of their victimization. This constitutes a doubly creative appropriation of their situation—the speaking word in the familiar guise of the spoken word.

### *The Wall Metaphor*

Another example of figurative language conveys an even more acute sense of resistance against prescribed vulnerability: the wall metaphor. In an opinion piece about her status as a vulnerable senior, the writer observes:

Recently, I got a new status: that of a vulnerable senior. Who must be protected. By a wall of antibody-forming, infected non-vulnerable people.  
[R5]

The statement illustrates how protective measures can engender an experience of passivity. Unable to fend for themselves, “vulnerable seniors” require the protection of others. They are stuck inside, cordoned off “by a wall of antibody-forming, infected non-vulnerable people.” The wall metaphor suggests a feeling of powerless confinement; it also invokes the image of an unresponsive, wall-like environment, of imposed isolation in private homes and nursing facilities: out of sight, out of mind.

Yet the metaphor also involves an ironic twist. While the wall condemns the speaker to passivity, it is itself an object, passive and devoid of initiative. Non-vulnerable people make up its bricks and mortar, but they don’t act of their own free choosing. In fact, they are themselves but servants of a higher rationale, relegated to the status of a giant human shield. Does the speaker talk bitterly or playfully? Does she view the non-vulnerable as antagonists or allies? It is hard to tell from one statement alone. What is clearly visible, however, is the speaker’s critical distance to prevailing clichés. Using figurative language, the speaker assumes her “new status,” but only ambiguously and ironically. This creates a small moment of subversion that stirs up the stereotypical distribution of agency and non-agency.

### *Figurative Speech as Conditioned Freedom*

Both the war analogy and the wall metaphor offer us examples for the co-appearance of clichés and novel images in the vulnerability discourse. Seen through the lens of Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s unrealizables, the discourse on “vulnerable seniors” works as a constrictive force that limits individual expression. Like a defendant on trial, the “vulnerable seniors” are bound to use the terms of their accusers. They can plead guilty or profess their

The war ended with the “hunger winter” few months before liberation, during which many fatalities were reported due to exhaustion, starvation, disease, and cold. While most of the eyewitnesses of the War’s horrors are deceased, the memory of the holocaust and the dreads of the war is still alive. Every year, the month of May kicks off with the credo “Lest we forget.” During these days, the Dutch people dwell on this dark episode of history, pay their respects during a minute of silence on Remembrance Day, and celebrate their freedom on Liberation day the day after. Cf. Coopmans (2018).

innocence; what they cannot do, however, is ignore the charges and walk out of the court room. Before they can state their case, they need to comment on the label that has been put on them. Surprisingly, this apparent limit to their expressive possibilities becomes the leverage point for the creative reappraisal of their situation.

As the spoken word and the speaking word interlock, we catch sight of what Merleau-Ponty describes as *coherent deformation*. A work of art, Merleau-Ponty (1964) argues, does not arise *ex nihilo*, but in conversation with certain traditions. It expresses something new by “deforming” what has come before, just as “the auxiliary line introduced into a diagram opens the road to new relations” (78). This idea of coherent deformation also applies to the analysis of metaphors (Landes 2013). Masters of metaphor intuitively grasp the similar in dissimilars; they are “geniuses of ambiguity” who sense the possibilities inherent in their linguistic situations. On this view, the art of metaphor involves “taking up the acquired language and bending it to express oneself in an act between pure repetition and pure creation” (30).

Regardless of their respective “mastery,” the figurative responses to the vulnerability discourse clearly bend acquired language and yield an effect of deformation. The interplay of the spoken word and the speaking word that we find in these examples complicates the idea of vulnerability as something imposed or external. While the vulnerability discourse does indeed act as an impersonal force that imposes an unrealizable limit on my being, its power is not absolute. Rather than exercising unchallenged command, the discourse also invites resistance, negotiation, and re-interpretation on the part of its participants.

On the one hand, war analogies reproduce stereotypical and impersonal ways of speaking; on the other hand, they introduce personal narratives of survival and resilience. This ambiguity of figurative speech—which is vividly present in the wall metaphor as well—gives the discourse around the “vulnerable senior” a double identity as both constitutive of subjects and constituted by them. There is thus an intricate dance between, on the one hand, the scientific, political, and social instruments which describe and prescribe vulnerability, and, on the other hand, the manifold manners by which concrete subjects assume their vulnerability.

Following Merleau-Ponty (2012), we can reframe the problem of the “vulnerable senior” in terms of conditioned freedom. Merleau-Ponty posits an inextricable tie of language and expression with embodied experience. In speech as in embodied practice, the subject is never fully determined and never absolutely free. As an older person in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, you find yourself in a field of possibilities that you did not create, choose, or even wish for. The field is complex, for it includes not only discursive prompts, but also the opinions of your friends and families, your bodily needs and capabilities, and the sediments of your past choices. It is an uneven landscape, tilted in a way that makes certain possibilities appear close at hand while relegating others to the far distance.

Different situations afford different attitudes toward the label of the vulnerable senior. Recall the reactions that we mapped in the previous section, which included feelings of affliction, resignation, and nonchalance expressed by individuals in similar—though never identical—discursive environments. These cases involve choices of attitude that *make sense*

only against the background of particular fields of possibilities. And while these choices are thus conditioned, this fact does not exclude genuine freedom. There is freedom in picking up and responding to a situation, an impure freedom that allows for nuance and degrees and that is still experienced as agency. On this account of conditioned freedom, there is no clear-cut separation between freedom and the world. According to Merleau-Ponty (2012), “we are mixed up with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion” (481).

#### IV. ENTANGLED VULNERABILITY

Public discourse around COVID-19, old age, and vulnerability has led us to consider vulnerability as something you become rather than something that you are. Becoming vulnerable has different aspects, three of which we discussed in this paper. Citing Butler’s (2021) most recent work, we argued that vulnerability is discursively constructed—a label with disempowering effects assigned to people from the outside. Subsequently, we considered the ways in which this “foreign element” has entered the lives of concrete subjects, drawing on Sartre’s (2003) and Beauvoir’s (1996) notion of the unrealizable. As we have shown, older people cannot realize the label of the vulnerable senior as a free goal of their action; yet, they are obliged to relate to it, to *make sense* of it. As an unrealizable, the label of the vulnerable senior does not form a part of a person’s situation. Nevertheless, it constitutes a real form of existence that people need to take up and relate to.

While the notion of the unrealizable illuminates the label of the vulnerable senior, it does not specify the ways in which people respond to it. As we have argued, becoming vulnerable not only involves the assignment of a label; it also requires that the people who have been thus labelled make sense of their new status. By tending to metaphors and analogies, we meant to clarify the ways in which older people assume their assigned vulnerability. Figurative language, we have argued, stages the emergence of personal meaning-making in the midst of the vulnerability discourse. In Merleau-Ponty’s account, a person’s basic attitude manifests itself in all their acts of expression—be it speech or basic bodily comportments. Drawing on his distinction between the spoken word and the speaking word, we were able to read different cases of creative language usage as openings into wild geographies of sense.

Almost two years into the global coronavirus crisis, we are starting to realize how pandemic rhetoric has reinforced the entanglement of age and vulnerability. It has led to novel practices of naming, of separating those who are to be protected from those who do not need protection. Older people, however, are not passive bodies that merely endure their being labelled; they are actors in a process of becoming who respond to their new “identity” in diverse ways—through appropriation, negotiation, or rejection. While they cannot escape the label of the vulnerable senior, they still have the conditioned freedom to take it up and interpret their own situation through it (or to reject it). This does not take away, of course, the effects of disempowerment and marginalization that labels such as “vulnerable senior” frequently entail. These effects are in need of critical evaluation,

especially in times of a global health crisis. What we are offering here is a first step in this direction by reckoning with vulnerability as a complex, entangled phenomenon.

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## APPENDIX: ORIGINAL QUOTES AND SOURCES

R = respondent number

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“Het uitrollen van een badlaken op een overvol strand? Daarvan kunnen zij [kwetsbaren] hooguit dromen. Een bezoek aan vrienden of familie is soms al te veel gevraagd, want stél dat ze besmet raken.” (R25)

"#GeenDorHout verdient alle steun." *Trouw*, August 20, 2020. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/geendorhoutverdient-allesteun~be1edb42/>.

“En dan moeten wij binnen blijven omdat bovenstaande mensen van hun terrasje en etentjes kunnen genieten. Ik vind het een schande dat men het alleen al durfde te zeggen.” (R26)

"Geen wederopbouw zonder de mensen die dit land hebben opgebouwd!" *Max Vandaag*, May 10, 2020. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.maxvandaag.nl/sessies/themas/familie-relatie/geen-wederopbouw-zonder-de-mensen-die-dit-land-hebben-opgebouwd/>.

“Noem het een wrang neveneffect, maar de coronacrisis zorgt er in elk geval voor dat de kwetsbaren van deze wereld weer eens met andere ogen worden bekeken. Zachtere ogen.” (R21)

Robert van de Griend. 2020. "Door het coronavirus kijkt men met zachtere ogen naar de kwetsbaren." *de Volkskrant*, March 27. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columnsopinie/door-het-coronavirus-kijkt-men-met-zachtere-ogen-naar-de-kwetsbaren~be5e807f/>.

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“De wereld bleek heel anders in elkaar te zitten dan vaak werd gedacht. Zij bleek niet om geld te draaien, maar om het leven, om de bescherming van de zwaksten en de kwetsbaarsten, ouderen die geen economisch nut meer vertegenwoordigden.” (R19)

"Nieuwe ervaringen van het virus zullen de coronacrisis extra schrijnend maken." *de Volkskrant*, August 2, 2020. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/uitgelicht/nieuwe-ervaringen-van-het-virus-zullen-de-coronacrisis-extra-schrijnend-maken~bf341442/>.

“Het dorre hout wordt gekapt, misschien een paar maanden eerder dan zonder virus. Moet iedereen die nog in de bloei van zijn leven zit daar alles voor opofferen?” (R13)

Peter Henk Steenhuis. 2020. "Wie bepaalt of ouderen moeten willen blijven leven?" *Trouw*, April 28. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/wie-bepaaltof-ouderenmoeten-willenblijvenleven~b4352da5/>.

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“Het coronavirus, en het beleid daaromheen, hebben me doen beseffen dat ik nadrukkelijk tot een categorie behoor. Een categorie die hoge prioriteit heeft in het beleid.” (R2)

Peter Adriani. 2020. "De keuze voor kwetsbare ouderen heeft ook een prijs." *Trouw*, May 2. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/de-keuzevoorkwetsbare-ouderenheeft-ookeenprijs~b1492b24e>.

“Sinds kort heb ik een nieuwe status: die van kwetsbare oudere. Die beschermd moet worden.” (R5)

"Kwetsbaar." *NRC*, March 30, 2020. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/03/30/kwetsbaar-a3995268>.

“Nu behoor ik tot een kwetsbare groep en ik moet zeggen dat ik de baten van corona tot nu toe gemist heb.” (R3)

"Ouderen worden gedegradeerd tot tweederangsburgers." *de Volkskrant*, July 20, 2020. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/ouderen-woorden-gedegradeerd-tot-tweederangsburgers~bbb50c51/>.

“Mensen vinden me zielig als ze horen dat ik hartpatiënt ben. ‘Wat verschrikkelijk voor je.’ Maar nu zie ik dat diezelfde mensen naar een bomvol strand gaan. De coronamaatregelen lappen ze aan hun laars.” (R12)

Isabel Baneke. 2020. "Kwetsbaren laten hun stem horen: Ik ben Freek, hartpatiënt en #GeenDorHout." *Trouw*, August 11. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/kwetsbarenlaten-hunstemhoren-ikben-freekhartpatient-engeendorhout~bcea716e/>.

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“Weet je wat het is, ik ben extra kwetsbaar, maar kwetsbare mensen weten dat van zichzelf, hè. Ik ben altijd voorzichtig. Ook met griep blijf ik bij anderen uit de buurt. Eigenlijk verandert er door de huidige maatregelen niet veel voor mij.” (R10)

"Joop (79) heeft steun aan God en aan Suzanne." 2020. *de Volkskrant*, March 26. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/mensen/joop-79-heeft-steun-aan-god-en-aan-suzanne~bf1827b4/>.

“Aan die laatste, nu veel gehoorde, uitdrukking [kwetsbare oudere] moet ik wennen.” (R1)

Peter Adriani. 2020. "De keuze voor kwetsbare ouderen heeft ook een prijs." *Trouw*. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/de-keuzevoorkwetsbare-ouderenheeft-ookeenprijs~b1492b24e>.

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“Nu zit ik in ballingschap in mijn caravan. Met prachtig uitzicht op de bomen en de vogeltjes. Wel heel vervelend dat ik niet bij mijn kinderen ben.” (R22)

"We willen graag iets doen en we dóén het nog ook." *de Volkskrant*, April 23, 2020. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuwsachtergrond/we-willen-graag-iets-doen-en-we-doen-het-nog-ook~ba4afdb7/>.

“Voor mij is de coronatijd een ramp. Ik ben bang, overal waar ik kom. Van de artsen mocht ik ook niet naar winkels. Te veel risico, vanwege mijn leeftijd en mijn oogaandoening.” (R4)

Rik Kuiper. 2020. "Kwetsbaren zien de coronadiscipline verwateren: ‘Roep niet dat ik een halve gare ben’." *de Volkskrant*, June 28. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuwsachtergrond/kwetsbaren-zien-de-coronadiscipline-verwateren-roep-niet-dat-ik-een-halvegare-ben~b2fe1da2/>.

“Angstig? Gelukkig niet, ook nooit echt geweest. Het leven is zoals het leven is! Een leven als kluizenaar uit angst voor virale besmetting? Dat is voor mij pas écht een angstbeeld!” (R6)

Paul Hustinx. 2020. "Weer werken: heerlijk!" *Medisch Contact*, May 8. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.medischcontact.nl/opinie/lezersschrijven/lezersverhalen/lezersverhaal/weer-werkenheerlijk.htm>.

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“Sinds kort heb ik een nieuwe status: die van kwetsbare oudere. Die beschermd moet worden. Door een muur van antistofvormende, geïnfecteerde niet-kwetsbaren.” (R5)

"Kwetsbaar". NRC, March 30, 2020. Accessed February 3, 2022. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/03/30/kwetsbaar-a3995268>.