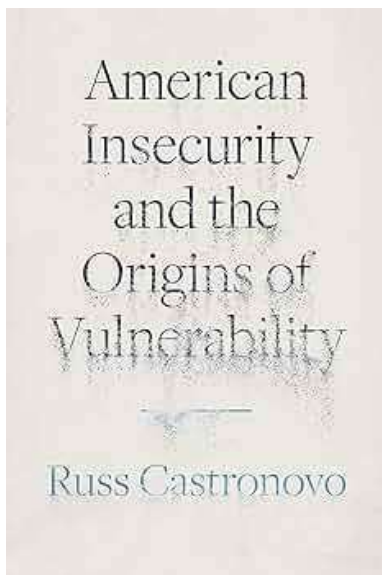*American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability*
Review by Olga Kajtár-Pinjung

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American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability
Review by Olga Kajtár-Pinjung

In *American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability,* Russ Castronovo provides a comprehensive analysis of the origins of in/security that have been the source of concern for American society since the first settlers set foot on the continent. Castronovo looks at security as an affective concern and focuses on the so-called "American homo securus" and its deep connection to in/security. Despite the popular and widespread belief that security is the solution to anxiety and insecurity, Castronovo claims that security itself is, in fact, the source of insecurity.

The book contains two parts; the first part entitled "Contradictions and Contours" analyzes the social and political role of security as Castronovo argues that security "is a mode of governance and way of feeling that is always in tension with itself, at odds between its aims and its methods, its presuppositions and its effects" (19). The first chapter includes thirteen propositions on the contradictions of security with the author claiming that security is more of an aesthetic phenomenon because it is ultimately an affective condition that is based on fear. In his view, fear is the driving force of security since there needs to be constant awareness of the existence of fear in civilization for it to be able to thrive (25). The example of 9/11 represents that security measures such as the USA PATRIOT Act, which increased the surveillance power of the government following the terrorist attacks, increase the anxiety and vigilance of people, which leads to a stronger feeling of insecurity and vulnerability (29). At the same time, the information needed for the successful implication of safety measures, causes, eventually, more insecurity. In today's information age, when fake news and disinformation become commonplace, the processing of information abundance "creates the problem of not knowing how to store or what to do with all this information" (32). The plethora of information and the lack of human capacity to process it enables uncertainty to emerge from this condition and uncertainty, especially in the context of national security, might lead to mistakes of various degrees. Castronovo mentions the example of US military and foreign policy in the question of whether Saddam Hussein's Iraq possessed any WMDs (weapons of mass destruction). Intelligence agencies were unsure, with that uncertainty leading ultimately to the invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, the second chapter of part one mentions nine historical instances of "how security became an ascendant political value that often overrides democracy, if not politics, itself" from 1753 to 1837 (55).

The second part of the book titled "Information, Aesthetics, Population" is comprised of four chapters, each of which studies security in literary works and their connection to the historical contexts in which they were created. The mixture of fictional and historical examples, however, can be confusing at times due to the lack of clear boundaries between them. Chapter four examines the ways in which overabundance of information contributes to the creation of anxiety and fear: "the security effort to gather intelligence frequently results in too much information, precipitating an encounter with the terror of the sublime" (115). For Castronovo, it is clear that the information overload creates a sense of infinity, which causes dread and this phenomenon of "coming to grips with the inadequacy of our senses, as we try to imagine some staggering infinity, that is sublime" according to the author (122) and he also illustrates this claim by discussing its role in the gothic novel of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland; or the Transformation, an American Tale* (1798). Chapter five titled "Jeffersonian Trembling" takes a closer look at the relationship between white nationalism and national security, specifically on how early nineteenth-century population statistics shifted the biopolitical agenda and how "blackness represented a growing national security crisis" (158). With the gradually increasing slave population in the South and free people of color in the North, blackness represented a threat to the safety of the white population over the country and thus colonization became a matter of national security (164), with colonization in this context meaning the (re)settlement

of the black population to Africa, more precisely, to Liberia. "Whether they backed colonization in order to make slaveholding more secure or to gradually promote abolition, Southerners and Northerners mobilized biostatistical information to offset the perception of racialized risk," writes Castonovo (165). The next chapter of the book, "Creating White Insecurity," examines pamphlets and newspapers that expressed their anti-colonization views and dominated the print culture in the 1820s. Such media outlets were *Freedom's Journal* and David Walker's *Appeal;* these reported on incidents of racial profiling, the horrors of slavery, and the growing nature of racial prejudice (205). "By encouraging African Americans to produce his pamphlet and strike fear onto the hearts of white Americans, Walker delivered a masterstroke by demonstrating that reading itself can be terrifying" (219), notes the author of the book, who also states that

> at one moment inviting the extension of surveillance, enumeration, and other forms of quantification, the subject of security at the next moment experiences vulnerability over the fact that so many facets of life are deemed insecure and in need of securitization. (230)

American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability is a comprehensive, incisive book that combines historical, cultural, and literary examples to showcase the process through which security has become a constant source of anxiety, insecurity, and vulnerability in the United States. Although seemingly redundant at times, nevertheless the author takes the reader on a quite successful journey to unravel the significance of the intertwined thread of in/security. As the book is a complicated and complex mixture of the analysis of fictional works of literature with historical and legal facts, it is highly recommended mostly students interested or specializing in American Studies and Inter-American Studies, since it masterfully highlights the most significant literary and historical points in US history with regard to issues of in/security.