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**Hogg, Emily J.; Simonsen, Peter** (eds.). *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 206 + xi pp.

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*Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, edited by Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen, aims to be "a critical examination of the various dimensions of precarity theory" (p. 2) and investigates how contemporary literature, art, and cultural texts respond to and re-envision precarity. As Hogg states in the introduction, the collection does not only want to emphasise the central importance of "vulnerability and insecurity, as they are experienced at work, in lack of access to state benefits and healthcare, in housing crisis, and in brutal anti-migrant policies" (p. 2) but also aims to highlight the role of literature, art, and culture in negotiating this prevalent precarity. In order to do so, the editors have identified three main angles of critical investigation: feeling, bodies, and time. These also serve to structure the book's eleven chapters into three corresponding parts. Consequently, precarity is seen as linked to (subjective) experience: that of feelings and affects evoked by precarious ways of life, which literature may both represent and evoke in readers; that of the body, whose vulnerability is both the prime reason for human precarity and a mechanism for resistance and change; and that of time, which in the context of precarious work is "often experienced as disorienting and anxiety provoking" (p. 19). The collection's central hypothesis and "new direction" is then that the interrelation of these three dimensions of feeling, bodies, and time (all of which have long been central to theoretical discussions of precarity) is "crucial to the theorization of precarity" and is productively reflected in literary and cultural texts (p. 15).

Emily Hogg's introduction first approaches the terms 'precarity,' 'precariousness,' and the 'precariat' through a short summary of various sociological and philosophical positions on the topic, by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Standing, Maribel Casas-Cortés, Judith Butler, and Isabella Lorey. Hogg shows that precarity is a deeply ambivalent term that describes not only exploitative labour conditions that lack the perceived security of traditional industrial employment, but also comprises "alternative accounts of interdependence, support and collectivity central to the task of imagining a more just and equitable future" (p. 11). Crucially, it is discourses originating in feminism and queer studies – whose investment in precarity theory Hogg persuasively shows – that allow for a more positive rethinking of the shared vulnerability at the heart of precarity. Often this happens by thinking precariousness, as Butler does, as a shared ontological condition, with the caveat that even "if precariousness is shared, it is not something we all experience to the same extent or in the same way" (p. 7). The critical reflection and rethinking of precarity is, as the contributions to this collection go on to show, a central task of literary and cultural texts that approach the issue.

The following first part on "feeling" begins with two articles that investigate the connection between precarity, anxiety, and class in contemporary narrative fiction. Liam Connell's opening chapter focuses on how "precarity novels" (p. 28) – contemporary realist fiction that depicts a protagonist's vulnerability as the result of precarity in capitalist societies – provoke an "anxious reading," that is, "feelings of stress and anxiety" in readers (p. 34). The realism and typically mundane character of these novels is instrumental in evoking this anxiety, since it means the readers' hopes for the improvement of the protagonist's situation are kept in check by their generic expectations: in a realist setting no improvement of the social conditions in which the protagonist is trapped is likely. Hence, "the affective content of the reading experience" (p. 35) mirrors the characters' anxiety and can so create a solidarity between characters and readers that may induce the latter to political action. This interest in precarity and anxiety is continued, albeit with a more text-centred focus, in the next chapter: Mathis G. Aarhus reads James Kelman's novel *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free* (2004) as a piece of working-class speculative fiction that showcases how anxiety is intricately linked to class power (p. 43). Beyond the anxiety caused by precarious labour, "status anxiety," understood as "fear of a loss of social status in the eyes of others" (p. 44), plays an insidious role in Kelman's novel as it maintains conditions of precarity by undermining forms of solidarity among the precariat, which, Aarhus observes, amounts to an "emotional class warfare" (p. 49).

The first section concludes with Simonsen's article on "the theatre of the precariat," a term he uses for recent plays that stage the precariat in such a way as to elicit the audience's sympathies (p. 61). In these plays, frequently through the

use of Brechtian alienation techniques, "the audience is made to realize that it holds the lives of the precariat in its hands and [...] that these lives are human, vulnerable, exposed and grievable" (p. 62). Like Connell, Simonsen thus focuses on the role of affects in reception. Simonsen's example is Gary Owen's monologue drama *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015), whose protagonist must appear increasingly sympathetic to the audience as she manages to channel her suffering into a "just and constructive anger" (p. 67) at austerity politics – an anger that also aims at "anyone with time and money enough to go to the theatre to watch the precariat act out instead of doing something about it" (p. 67). This anger of a sympathetic member of the precariat, Simonsen's hopeful diagnosis goes, may impact on the audience and eventually lead to social change.

The volume's next part, on "bodies," initially focuses on precarity and/in performance. It opens with Marianne Kongerslev's excellent reading of Indira Allegra's performance *Woven Account* (2014), which comprises a blanket woven by the artist as well as a poetic filmic performance of the weaving set in several locations in the San Francisco Bay Area, and addresses homophobic violence in the United States. Consequently, the focus here is not so much on economic precarity as on a more fundamental "right to life" (p. 77). In the performance, Allegra's own body "comes to symbolize [...] the intersecting and interlocking precarities associated with being LGBTQI2S+, a woman, Native and African American" (p. 85). Kongerslev insightfully expands Judith Butler's theoretical framework of *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* to the context of Native and African American lives. Given the long history of racist colonial and sexual violence against Native Americans, "Allegra's performance [...] functions as a reclamation of confidence, wholeness and grievability" (p. 79). It is, Kongerslev argues, a peaceful "bashing back" (p. 80) that through the concrete settings of the performance makes visible the trauma of colonisation and "reinscribe[s] a Native presence onto the landscape of the city" (p. 82). *Woven Account* thus perhaps is the most hopeful and empowering artistic engagement with precarity discussed in this volume. The interest in bodies is continued by Katharina Pewny and Tessa Vannieuwenhuyze. In their chapter on "Precarious Bodies on the Move, Precarious Bodies under Attack," they focus on Tanja Ostojić's performance project *Misplaced Women?* (2009–2020) and on Yael Ronen's play *The Situation* (2015). In both cases the vulnerability and precariousness (in Butler's and Levinas's sense) of migrant bodies is highlighted, while their "aesthetics of connectedness" (p. 91) evokes empathy and solidarity with these precarious bodies. The chapter ends on a sombre note, reflecting on incidences in which performers of performances of precarity were subjected to violence from right-wing groups.

This is followed by a shift back to narrative fiction in Sophy Kohler's contribution, which puts contemporary South African literature in dialogue with notions

of precarity from the Global North. She persuasively argues that Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive* (2016) and Mohale Mashigo's short story "Ghost Strain N" (2018) use disease as "a metonym for precarious living" (p. 110) and so reveal the precarity of South African society and the disaffection of the country's youth. Both texts leave their protagonists in states of uncertain temporality, as "living dead" (p. 120): where the HIV positive protagonist of *The Reactive* is living in an endless now, the virus that spreads in "Ghost Strain N" keeps the affected and the not affected alike in a state of constant limbo that likewise mirrors social disaffection and the "sense of an imperfect present that is without the compensation of a hopeful future" (p. 119).

Time is the central topic of the third section, which starts with Alissa G. Karl's analysis of two films. She contrasts the opening number, "Another Day of Sun," of *La La Land* (2016) with *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) to highlight the different stances both films take on the historical genesis of precarious labour. *La La Land*'s musical form links precarious labour to de-industrialisation and hearkens back to "the bygone days of industrial Fordism" (p. 129), which Karl critiques as a (white) "racial nostalgia" (p. 130) for something neither geographically nor historically unique. In contrast, *Sorry to Bother You*'s generic mix of science fiction, magical realism, and comedy makes for a more historically and racially aware presentation of precarious labour's "near-total dependency on the markets" (p. 129). The interest in the historical ramifications of precarity is continued in Benjamin Kohlmann's compelling investigation of the formal politics of "proletarian modernism – a mode of formally experimental and politically committed writing" ranging from the long 1930s into the present (p. 144). Kohlmann's important contribution not only helps to re-focus texts that have gained little critical attention, but also, by re-reading Marx with and against Žižek, establishes a double sense of the proletariat's "substanceless subjectivity" (p. 144), that is, "its reduction to abstract labour power in the capitalist system of exploitation" (p. 157), that is then thematised in different ways and encapsulated in the experimental forms of his literary examples. John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936) seeks to frame this substancelessness as a unifying ground for political action, whereas David Peace's *GB84* (2004) focuses on the ontological vulnerability that conditions this substancelessness. A particular strength of this chapter is the perceptive narratological analysis as well as the nuanced discussion of periodisation of the proletarian modernism.

Hogg's own contribution centres on the temporal experience of precarity. Building on theoretical work by Standing, Lauren Berlant, Anna Tsing, and Mark Fisher, she convincingly diagnoses a detachment from the future in precarity, where "[p]recarious time […] is a difficulty with imagining the future that prompts a sense of loss and longing for the forms of anticipation that were prevalent in the

past" (p. 164). On the one hand, literature may reflect this temporal anxiety: Hogg's example is Anneliese Mackintosh's short story "Limited Dreamers" (2014), whose protagonists are stuck in the precarious "expanded present" (p. 166). On the other hand, Hogg argues, literature can challenge such notions of temporal precarity by offering alternative temporalities, as is the case in Lee Rourke's *Vulgar Things* (2014). Precarious temporality is also the focus of the following chapter, by Walt Hunter, which is the collection's only one on poetry: after an overview of the poetic *topos* of arresting time, Hunter turns to the temporality of precariousness, which has, he suggests, the "frozen quality" of a "permanent fragility" (p. 177). He traces this in two poems that manage "to archive the overwhelming presentness of experience as it passes" (p. 178), US poet Jorie Graham's "Ashes" and Syrian-Palestinian-Swedish poet Ghayath Almadhoun's "The Details." While both poems address different types of precariousness – caused by climate change and the Syrian War –, they both seem to "occupy a perpetual present" (p. 182). However, Hunter convincingly shows, this is not an attempt at escapism into the eternity of poetry, but "a reminder of the lived experiences" of precarity (p. 185) that rejects any sense of security, which in the 21st century is too often associated with nationalism and racism.

The collection concludes with a chapter by Brian Yazell on Kim Stanley Robinson's climate-/science-fiction novel *New York 2140*. Building on Standing's work, Yazell finds that temporality with its attendant insecurities "divides rather than unites different groups of the precariat" (p. 190) based on different temporal projections of (in)security. Speculative fiction, he demonstrates in his reading of Robinson's novel, is particularly apt to expose these temporal divisions and imagine alternatives of shared temporality as well as "solidarity and radical action" (p. 197), which, crucially, could be enacted in the present.

Overall, the contributions to this volume show how omnipresent precarity is in 21st-century societies. Undoubtedly, a great strength of the compilation is that it highlights this pervasiveness through its discussion of a broad variety of literary and cultural texts under the precarity paradigm. The articles make clear that the multi-faceted artistic responses to precariousness, as is typical of crises, can also be seen as an opportunity for change, and, by bringing together a broad range of different theoretical approaches from within literary and cultural studies and beyond, they unfold considerable critical productivity. At the same time this multi-facetedness also means the assemblage of the chapters can appear arbitrary or eclectic at times. The categories of feeling, bodies, and time are themselves so broad that they only provide the loosest of threads to keep the chapters together. While the individual contributions to the volume often make important contributions to their respective areas of research, a clearer structuring of the volume as a whole would have been helpful. For instance, the focus on the *interrelation* of

feeling, bodies, and time promised in the introduction (p. 15) is not something that all the chapters deliver. Conversely, some of the common threads emerging across several articles are not discussed in the introduction: the link of precarity with climate change – certainly one of the foremost social challenges of the present moment – is not addressed there, even though two chapters make that connection; neither is there any reference to the Covid-19 pandemic (though Kohler's contribution links illness/pandemics and precarity), which began over a year before the book's publication and surely carries the potential for drastic changes to the situation of the precariat. More fundamentally, the ethical implications of both social precarity and ontological precariousness are not addressed in the introduction (and "ethics" has not even made it into the book's index), although they feature in several of the contributions. Nevertheless, *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture* is a substantial contribution to the ongoing scholarly discussions of precarity in literary and cultural studies and demonstrates the broad appeal that the precarious in its various guises can have for critical discourse in the 21st century. It will provide scholars in the field(s) with a starting point for their theoretical research as well as with a wide range of literary and cultural phenomena to consider under the auspices of precarity.