

Exertions • Book Reviews

Book Review: Living with Precariousness

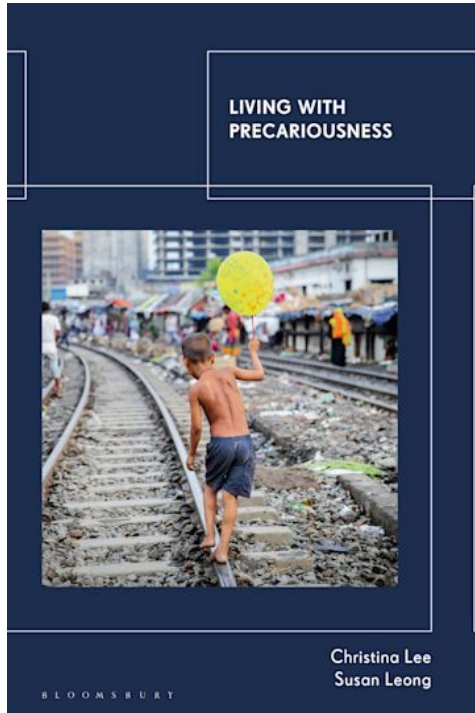
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***Living with Precariousness*, edited by Christina Lee and Susan Leong (2023). London: Bloomsbury Academic.**



This volume brings together thirteen chapters that explore the widespread socio-economic condition of precariousness. As introduced by editors Christina Lee and Susan Leong, precariousness is framed as both a “shared [...] state of being” and a “banal part of life today” (p. 3). While precariousness is not a new historical phenomenon, the chapters in this volume suggest a novel and more pervasive understanding of the condition today. The scope of what it means to be “living with precariousness” is central to this volume, both in the breadth of topics covered by the authors and in how precariousness is ultimately framed.

The chapters in Part 1, “Precarious Conditions,” tie individual experiences of precariousness to their social, economic, and political bases. In Chapter 1, Susan Leong posits a new framing of precariousness-as-experience amidst a continuum of theory and practice. Drawing on interviews conducted in Australia during a time in which the country was responding to multiple crises, including COVID-19, wildfires, and immigration, Leong concludes that such societal challenges are ones of “banal precariousness” (p. 15). Banal, that is, not because precariousness is unfelt, but rather because its affects—of never quite, of always partial—are chronic.

In Chapter 2, Diane Foley, mother of executed journalist James W. Foley, reflects on her son’s life to demonstrate the precariousness of journalism in conflict areas. The violence and grief that her son endured at the end of his journalistic career, as well as by his family following his death, are part of a broader set of adversities, such as press censorship, insecure employment, and the obstacles of bureaucracy. Quoting her son, Foley concludes it is moral—not physical—courage that should serve as the guiding principle to resist hardship.

In Chapter 3, Julian Lee et al. consider the sense of hopelessness felt by young people today. Contending with “pre-traumatic stress” (p. 42) about the future and uncertain of how to mitigate its attendant crises—such as insecure work, novel viruses, climate disaster, and mental-health epidemics—young people are said to be caught in “a struggle for being” (Jackson, 2005). From a pedagogical perspective, the authors argue for a shift away from actionless classroom critique and toward imaginative solutions for change.

In Chapter 4, Salem Askari and Caroline Fleay recount the experiences of asylum seekers arriving in Australia by irregular channels. For these individuals, many of whom are fleeing acute political and material precariousness, life does not automatically stabilize upon arrival. Rather, external forces such as Australia's punitive immigration policies draw attention to the profound sense of suffering that an uncertain immigration status can cause.

Part 2, "Precarious Spaces," focuses on the macro scale by exploring the contexts that help reproduce, cultivate, and resist precariousness. In Chapter 5, Christina Lee examines the lives of the residents of China's "ghost cities," named for their abundance of empty spaces and lack of human activity. On the one hand, the very idea of the "ghost city"—dependent on capital from an ever-fluctuating global market—implies a high degree of precariousness. On the other hand, Lee asks readers to consider how such narratives erase those who have built their lives there. Paying attention to the people living in ghost cities, she argues, can reveal new ways of inhabiting spaces otherwise portrayed as devoid of hope.

In marked contrast, Chapter 6 explores the phenomena of Tiny Houses. Amidst anxieties over the lack of affordable housing and urban homelessness, Tiny Houses are fetishized in the media as a cost-effective and innovative response to precarious living. Clearly, celebration of Tiny Houses in the media works to assuage rather than draw attention to the issues that they claim to solve. However, author Madeleine Esch argues that the Tiny House movement also fundamentally re-evaluates what it means to live "the good life" (Berlant, 2011) not in a large home of one's own purchase.

In Chapter 7, Ben Beitler explores media portrayals of environmental precarity through a comparative analysis of two works: the documentary series *Our Planet* (2019) and the novel *The Hungry Tide* (Ghosh, 2006). While the former provides an expansive view of biodiversity and the global threat posed by climate change, its focus on narrowly defined "ecosystems" means that it also erases the role of historical and colonial-era violence. The latter, on the other hand, foregrounds legacies of the colonial era, highlighting how "environmental precarity" is an empty signifier if the experiences of those who cause and are affected by it are not taken into consideration.

In Chapter 8, Julie Macken and Sonia Tascón discuss the twin effects of Australia's "Black Summer" wildfires and the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how precarious events expose our collective vulnerabilities as interdependent beings (Butler, 2004). In a moment in which individualist notions of success and coping no longer work, the authors instead evoke Guy Standing's (2011) idea of "commoning." Trying moments like these, as Macken and Tascón argue, offer a glimpse at "new narrative[s] of radical interdependency" (p. 155).

Part 3, "Precarious Bodies," returns to the micro scale to explore how precariousness is embodied—physically, emotionally, and socially—by those affected by it. In Chapter 9, Alice Driver shares the story of Marfil, a Salvadoran trans-woman seeking asylum in the United States. Driver recounts Marfil's highly precarious

experiences in the sex trade and at the hands of predatory state institutions and an abusive family. In detailing Marfil's multiple border crossings, court dates, and bureaucratic obstacles, the chapter traces the precariousness that existed throughout her asylum journey and restrictive "path to freedom."

In Chapter 10, Helen Fordham explores the effects of precariousness on one's agency in a personal account of transitioning her mother to aged care. Findings show that many who live in aged care in Australia have their human rights, dignity, and freedoms ignored. As Fordham indicates, precariousness along with physical and mental decline expose the vulnerabilities of late old age. Aged-care facilities continue to sequester the "non-contributing" elderly from public view, restricting how much their residents can (or feel like they can) actively participate in social life.

In Chapter 11, Alicia Rana and Kevin Bales examine how competing definitions of modern slavery create intersecting modes of precariousness for victims. Disagreement on the causes and nature of modern slavery has resulted in legislators from governments around the world overlooking the actual victims and perpetrators. Contributions from an anonymous survivor also expose how freedom from slavery does not guarantee freedom from precariousness, as this person comes to face risks over healthcare, employment, and re-enslavement.

In Chapter 12, Shona Illingworth, John Tulloch, and Caterina Albano analyze Illingworth's film on Tulloch's post-traumatic stress after the 7/7 terrorist bombings, which took place in July 2005 in London. In *216 Westbound*, the "entanglement of memory, media, body and technology" (p. 209) is depicted through Tulloch's experiences. Discrepancies between these experiences and worldwide media reports and his own disassembly of time, space, and sounds unveil new forms of precariousness.

Finally, in Chapter 13, Alexandra Halkias discusses the strangeness of everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, people became acutely aware of new-found practices such as mask-wearing and online synchronous video communication, as well as the changes in long-established commuting and working patterns. As these "small explosions" (p. 223) seemed to occur with more frequency, Halkias asks how we might use these and other moments to imagine new ways of living with precariousness.

Living with Precariousness represents a significant contribution to the study of precarity, akin to reference volumes of the past (cf. *Cultural Anthropology's* "Precarity" collection or *Anthropology of Work Review's* "Virtual Issue" on the topic). Authors in this volume are united in their relational approach to precarity, which synthesizes conceptual analysis and embodied experiences of precarious life (Millar, 2017). This approach seeks to "draw lessons from those who are coping with, resisting, and surviving the harshness of precarious lives" (p. 5). Amidst the scholarly, and sometimes insular, debates around precarity that create dichotomies between theory and practice (Leong, this volume) or as an ontological or labor condition (Han, 2018), the volume's relational approach to this complex socio-economic phenomenon provides a welcome grounded and people-centered alternative. To this end, the dedication of the book's authors to depicting the visceral nature of precariousness in this volume is invaluable.

The scope of the book is not without limitations, however. While featuring the work of authors from a variety of backgrounds makes for a diverse and accessible collection of texts, there is a marked lack of reflection of the methodological and epistemological challenges that such a publishing endeavor creates. Research-minded readers may be left wondering how chapters written by ethnographers, journalists (and mothers of journalists), filmmakers, and activists can be meaningfully compared. Overall, however, this volume deftly attends to the “visceral knot of precariousness” that, regardless of definition or depiction, “has become an indelible part of our social imaginaries” (p. 5).

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Tom Parkerson is a Ph.D. student in social anthropology in the School of Global Development of the University of East Anglia (Norwich, UK). His current research explores the relationship between language, work, and precarity.