

BARBARA KORTE
FRÉDÉRIC REGARD (Eds.)

Narrating “Precariousness”

Modes, Media, Ethics



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Narrating ‘Precariousness’: Modes, Media and Ethics¹

1. Introduction

The interest of this book in ‘precariousness’ is embedded in the revival of humanist criticism and the ‘ethical turn’.² Such criticism focuses its attention on moral issues and on moral response, and it is unsurprising that it often centres on the ‘bareness’³ and fragility of human life, as well as the perils and misery to which it can be exposed. The contributions to our book also focus on the portrayal of lives that are ‘precarious’: insecure, unpredictable, endangered, on the edge and out of balance, threatened in their corporeal and mental integrity, and therefore often resulting in trauma.⁴ Such lives call to mind the relationality of human existence and demand intersubjective recognition such as sympathy, empathy⁵ and the “basic social emotion” of compassion (Nussbaum),⁶ while they also often invite more dubious reactions such as a voyeuristic gaze and vicarious pleasure. But such lives do not only pose an ethical challenge – they are just as often a challenge to representation. A leading question of this volume is therefore how precarious and injured lives can be represented – and thus become recognisable – even when their circumstances seem unspeakable in both the literal and the metaphorical sense.

At the present cultural moment, much attention is awarded to the precarity caused by re-organisations of the labour market, the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism and the recent wave of inequality and poverty it has generated worldwide.⁷ But life is also rendered precarious by many other causes: the devastations caused by war and terror, the (ab-)use of science and technology, exploitation of the environment, political perse-

¹ For their invaluable help in getting this volume ready for publication, we would like to thank Katja Bay, Natalie Churn and Kathrin Göb.

² The objectives of the ethical turn in literary studies are “issues of how humans live and what they live for”, and this presupposes that representations bear a relation to pre-representational worlds and communicate values that matter to their producers and consumers (Schwarz 3).

³ On the notion of bare life as “life exposed to death” and thus representing “the originary political element” cf. Agamben (88).

⁴ For a definition of trauma cf., for instance, Cathy Caruth: “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11).

⁵ On empathy vs. sympathy (as instant identification) cf. Richard Sennett’s *Together*.

⁶ Cf. Berlant’s *Compassion* for a critical discussion of compassion which, as a claim for ameliorative action, can also entail ethically dubious practices such as the measuring of different scales of suffering.

⁷ On cultural representations of poverty cf. Korte and Regard, and Korte and Zipp.

cution, voluntary and enforced migration, sexual exploitation, or racial and gender discrimination. Apart from pre-individual causes, there is also, of course, the distress people face individually, for instance when afflicted with serious illness or personal loss and deprivation. Reasons to investigate the dangers to human life are manifold and many-faceted, and the chapters of this book illustrate this range. They also, however, take issue with the ways in which critics and theorists have conceived ‘precariousness’.

Since Butler’s seminal *Precarious Life* (2004), the terms ‘precarious’ and ‘precariousness’ have proliferated in scholarly debate with various shades of meaning and not always as clearly defined terms. It is therefore an aim of this volume to explore the analytical reach and power of these concepts – not primarily through abstract discussion, however, but through case studies of ways in which precarious *lives* have been represented in various modes and media. The focus of these studies is on narrative representation because, as Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack claim, “[pa]rt of being human involves the daily struggle with the meanings and consequences of our actions”, and this struggle is “most often understood in narrative structures as we tell others and ourselves about what has transpired or what we fear will transpire in the future” (ix). The “act of telling stories”, understood as “the gesture to represent what all too often is unrepresentable, ineffable”, is one that “grounds and distinguishes human activity” (ix-x). Some chapters critique Butler explicitly and replace or complement her categories with concepts from a range of other disciplines, including psychoanalysis and trauma studies as well as ecocriticism. Most importantly, all chapters concretise ‘precariousness’ through the lens of cultural production as they investigate novels, films, photo books, theatre plays, poetry, hip-hop, graphic novels and computer games. In *The Weight of the World*, Pierre Bourdieu emphasises the importance of literature’s particularity and complexity for the representation of ‘miserable’ lives, and recommends the novel as a model for sociologists: “following the lead of novelists such as Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf, we must relinquish the single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine, point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers – and by readers too, at least to the extent they do not feel personally involved” (3). The case studies in the present book treat literature, film and other representations in similar ways: as manifestations of real and fictional situations and figures that are particular rather than general and thus permit the testing of Butler’s and other thinkers’ categories for ethical-cultural analysis.

2. ‘Precarious Life’ Revisited

For Butler, ‘precariousness’ is originally a category – which she further elaborates in later writings such as *Frames of War* (2009) and her 2011 Neale Wheeler Watson lecture – to grasp a fundamental, ontological fragility of corporeal existence that is common to all living beings. As she states in her preface to the essays in *Precarious Life*, they were written “in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression” that followed the events of 9/11 (xi). When this terrible toll on human life was taken, she writes, “an unbearable vulnerability was exposed” (xi), and she takes “injurability and aggression” (xii) as points of departure for her new conception of political life. According to Butler, the Twin Towers events force us to think of political

life as an “inevitable interdependency” (xii) – an interdependency she finds difficult to theorise, as she finally confesses (xiii). In part, this difficulty may be connected with some imprecisions in Butler’s use of terms: in her 2004 *Precarious Life*, the adjective ‘precarious’ refers to both precariousness as a general property of life *and* a more concrete precarity – in the sense of an insecure existence and a higher probability of experiencing suffering – that is *not* equally distributed (and therefore poses an ethical challenge): “There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others” (xii). The word ‘precarity’, however, is not used in the 2004 publication.⁸ Just as importantly, Butler tends to conflate the terms ‘precariousness’ and ‘vulnerability’, sometimes using them interchangeably even though their etymology reveals different structural assumptions behind them. The adjective ‘vulnerable’ comes from the Latin verb ‘vul-nerare’: to wound, to injure, to offend. The verb itself comes from the noun ‘vulnus’, which means a wound, an injury, a cut, but also a pain, a blow, a twist of fate. The *OED* comes to the conclusion that a vulnerable being is susceptible to being wounded, either physically or psychologically. ‘Vulnerability’ forces me to acknowledge the presence of another who can hurt me, which implies a power relationship. Self and other are caught in a structure of violent *opposition between an offender and an offended*. ‘Precariousness’ comes from the Latin adjective ‘precarious’: “given as a favour, depending on the favour of another”. Its meaning is derived from the verb ‘precor’, which means to pray, or to supplicate, and it survived in a now obsolete definition of the English ‘precarious’ with the meaning “suppliant, supplicating; importunate”. The *OED* illustrates this notion by quoting from an article written by Dr Johnson in 1753: a precarious being, he explains, is a being “incessantly solliciting [sic] the assistance of others”. The *OED* adds that what may be said of a human being may also be said of an argument which would be insufficiently grounded and therefore liable to fail. Precariousness may therefore be said to define a being or a statement which would be dependent on chance and circumstance, *dependent*, that is, *on the good will or on the pleasure of the other*. Butler’s discussion of precariousness, which is strongly centred on the perception and recognition of an

⁸ In *Frames of War*, Butler distinguishes between precariousness and precarity: ‘precariousness’ is here defined as a *social-ontological* category that “implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (14), while ‘precarity’ is “that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection” (26). Butler’s use of terms has particularly attracted criticism in the context of labour. Neilson and Rossiter, for instance, suggest that precariousness as an ontological and existential category should be distinguished more clearly “from precarity intended in the labour market sense”, where the term “refers to all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation”, but also “extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations”. For a critical discussion of Butler’s terms from the perspective of governance studies cf. Lorey.

other's precarious life,⁹ tends to neglect the pragmatic dimension that Johnson's use still entails: that precariousness forces me to acknowledge the *presence of an other as an addressee*, someone who may, or may not, listen to my calls for help. Again, this is a different structure than in the case of vulnerability. First, it is no longer a structure of violent opposition, implying an asymmetrical power relationship. Rather, it is a structure of communication, implying a dialogical relationship. Interdependency is also linguistic, and it implies an enunciative setup. Second, it is no longer a purely binary structure involving two antagonistic agencies – an offender and an offended. The structure accommodates the possibility of a third source of agency, a third actant on the scene of interdependency – a witness if you like, or a writer, journalist, novelist, dramatist, who may or may not acknowledge the existence, or the importance of the plight, of the vulnerable person. This third agent is the one who may redistribute positions and redefine the offender as criminal and the offended as victim.

It is precisely this third agency through which this volume approaches precariousness and its political and moral implications. As Susan Sontag has poignantly argued in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, human suffering calls for engaged attention and reaction when it is witnessed and when it is represented,¹⁰ and in a side remark she claims that narrative representation may be “more effective than an image” in this respect, partly because of the length of time a narrative obliges one to look and to feel (122). All our contributors provide close readings of the essentially narrative representations they scrutinise. As will thus become evident, not only are the lives represented in these texts precarious in multiple ways, but in many instances the very means of representation themselves become precarious as they struggle to express what seems to evade or even explode the sense-making mechanisms of narration. It may be useful here to once more go back to the etymology of the word ‘precarious’ as “obtained by entreaty, depending on the favour of another”. In order to be represented, precarious and injured lives often depend on the ‘favour’ of people who do not live precariously themselves. Hence the question of agency over representation (as famously raised by Gayatri Spivak) and specifically of the kinds of “voice” or “embodied position” (Coudry 8) through which precariousness is articulated or mediated. As Nick Coudry reminds us, voice in this sense is a basic human value: it “values my and your status as ‘narratable’ selves” (13) and “involves, from the start, both speaking and *listening*, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative” (8). If those who narrate precarious

⁹ Especially in her discussion of Levinas in her 2004 publication. Here Butler posits that precarious life implies a particular “structure of address” (130), and that this structure is at the core of the Levinasian notion of ‘face’: “To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life, or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awokeness [...] to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics” (134).

¹⁰ Compare this to Slavoj Žižek's reflections on subjective and systemic violence and his position that violence should be thought through not from an engaged but a distanced position: “There are situations when the only truly ‘practical’ thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately and to ‘wait and see’ by means of a patient, critical analysis. Engagement seems to exert its pressure on us from all directions” (6).

lives have an ethical obligation, so have the addressees of these narratives. Our chapters attest to the basic 'narratability' of precarious existence, while being sensitive to the potentials and limitations of this narratability in different modes and media.

3. The Case Studies

The cases discussed in our chapters range across the anglophone world, but a focus on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries allows for an analysis of the cultural moment that inspired Butler's and other thinkers' ethical inquiry. Beyond their special concerns, the chapters together address general questions implicated in narrations of precarious lives. How are ethical positions negotiated in the interplay between the represented on the one hand and agents of representation on the other? How do narratives cope with the seeming ineffability of precarious and injured lives? How do different media and genres, or narrative agencies and strategies, configure precariousness differently? How do narrative representations 'perform' precariousness? How can representation inspire the social imagination, evoke social emotions and configure possibilities of action?

The case studies are grouped into two major areas: precarious worlds and precarious selves. In the first section, Lena Steveker looks at fictional re-evaluations of the two world wars which determined European and world politics throughout the twentieth century. Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy is engaged with demythologising the 'Great' War, while A. L. Kennedy's *Day* is concerned with undermining the notion of the Second World War as a 'just' one which the British fought in defence of civilisation and humanity. Each author's fiction problematises the damaging effects which the inhumane conditions of industrial warfare have on human psychic stability. Both Barker's trilogy and Kennedy's novel feature protagonists whose traumatic war experiences have caused them to develop split personalities; and it is with the help of these characters' mental instabilities that the texts negotiate the precarious consequences entailed in a self's complete loss of control and power over one's own well-being. But while Kennedy's *Day* is indebted to liberal humanism in its celebration of 'high' art and its supposed unifying effects on human selfhood, Barker's novels suggest a reconciliation of traumatised self and internal other which is best analysed through the lens of Levinasian ethics: her trilogy privileges a concept of dual, if not multiple selfhood by representing healing as the ethical acceptance of difference, not its repression or expulsion. Thus, Barker's novels defy the violence which, according to Levinas, comes from subjecting the other to the self's understanding.

Barbara Kowalczyk discusses photography of the Vietnam War by the Welsh photographer Philip Jones Griffiths, who covered the war for the Magnum photo agency. His three-year-long work was printed in *Vietnam Inc.* (1971), which was immediately recognised as a landmark in concerned photojournalism. For more than three decades, Griffiths returned to Vietnam to capture postwar life and he eventually published two other major books, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Viet Nam* and *Viet Nam at Peace*. Drawing on Susan Sontag's seminal work on photography, Kowalczyk claims that this trilogy's narrative thread apprehends the essence of precariousness through a restricted selection of photographs which establish a network of gazes. Her discussion

focuses on a paradigm which, from eye-to-eye confrontations to upsetting blank looks, reveals that the photographic chronicles of the Vietnam Trilogy are themselves precarious as they generate inconclusive, not to say perilous, narrative hermeneutics.

Rudolph Glitz turns to a motif repeatedly occurring in popular science fiction: the figure of the feral child that challenges notions of humanism and a civilised society. Glitz discusses two films, George Miller's *The Road Warrior* (1981) from the *Mad Max* series and James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), as well as the more recent computer game *BioShock* (2007). In all three narratives, the protagonists with whom recipients are encouraged to identify encounter the precarious human other in the form of a feral child of some sort, whose vulnerable and simultaneously threatening characteristics recall Levinas's notion of the face as invoked and endorsed by Butler. Glitz scrutinises the political and moral implications of the three narratives and shows how they can be related to debates about the condition of precariousness and possibilities of its representation. Glitz reads the three science-fiction narratives through pertinent sections of Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) and Lee Edelman's contribution to queer studies, *No Future* (2004), and then shows how the narratives challenge Edelman's and Butler's arguments.

The power of popular media to address the ethical challenges of precarious lives is also demonstrated by Gabriele Rippl and Stephanie Hoppeler, who turn to another popular medium. Graphic novels and comic books are an intermedial form of storytelling that often engages with devastating experiences such as war and terror, totalitarianism and the Holocaust as well as domestic and individual forms of violence and trauma. Hoppeler and Rippl investigate how graphic novels and comic books published since the 1960s have treated the scientific, medical and military use of radioactivity and its consequences for human life: as a daunting apocalypse which leads to excruciating experiences, but also as an exciting negotiation of limits. Since scenarios such as nuclear disaster challenge conventional language and commonsense reasoning, their representation is itself precarious. Rippl and Hoppeler show how graphic novels and comic books with their intermedial narration have a special potential to enhance their readers' participation and to express trauma, fears and anxieties through pictures and visual codes in ways that are precluded in purely verbal narratives.

Ellen Dengel-Janic identifies 'precarious geographies' in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. In his works, the Indian author portrays a multitude of characters that are affected by the precariousness caused by migration and diasporic experience, thereby creating a variety of 'cartographic narratives' in the sense of J. Edward Mallot. While the main focus of Ghosh's early novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) lies in the impact of history on geographical locations, the precariousness of nature moves centre stage in *The Hungry Tide* (2005). In his first outright ecocritical novel, Ghosh intertwines the precarious social position of his characters with their perilous and shifting regional location in the tide country of the Ganges delta.

The second section is dedicated to representations of precarious selves. Stephan Laqué discusses Mike Leigh's feature film *Naked* (1993) as a pronounced break with other films by Leigh which tend to follow a pattern of benign, suburban middle-class characters bravely shouldering their damaged lives. *Naked* departs from this pattern not only in subject matter and character, but also in technique: if Leigh's films are commonly concerned with economic and social precarity, *Naked* addresses more fun-

damental questions of precariousness, namely of unstable subject formations and forms of existence. Laqué argues that Johnny, the film's protagonist, is a study in the extremes to which human 'nakedness' in the sense of self-exposure can be pushed. He is created as a cynic in the Foucauldian sense: as a person who embraces *parrhesia*, the compulsion to say everything, to speak the truth regardless of the consequences. His *parrhesia* is postmodern both in that it playfully subverts other people's faith in certainty and coherence, and in that it is entirely fuelled by language, by Johnny's incessant rhetorical bravado and competitiveness rather than by the ethical agenda which motivates classical cynics. Being "naked" – on the street and without a job – is as much part of Johnny's 'care of himself' (Foucault) as his rhetorical self-exposure. His tangible immorality keeps our attitude towards the character suspended between admiration and contempt, between empathy and revulsion – a suitably precarious response to a magnificent exploration of the radical precariousness which contemporary cynicism entails.

Jagna Oltarzewska explores the rapper Eminem's autofictions. Eminem's progress, from his early album *The Slim Shady LP* (1999), has been punctuated by a series of 'reality' songs that chronicle the experience of his coming-of-age in a violent and poverty-stricken milieu and his rise to superstardom with its ambivalent rewards. These involve an elaborate and unsparing self-staging: Eminem's troubled family history, his dysfunctional relationships with family members, the pressures of fame, his struggle with depression, drug-addiction, and his spell in rehab and consequent recovery have all been grist to the mill. The precarious life that Eminem references is that of a trashed and disposable population, and his lyrics embrace the African-American experience as much as his own, as a token white practitioner of rap whose skills were honed on the black hip hop circuits of Detroit. His narratives mirror the adversarial milieu and harsh experiences he has known, and are openly provocative. Obscenity imparts its own species of precarious life to the rapper's narrative content, threatening to overpower it, and raising inevitable questions concerning the possibility of (self-)representation. Oltarzewska brings the concept of "linguistic conjuncture", as elaborated by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, to bear on the seam of obscenity tapped by Eminem (and other 'reality' rappers); it forces the listener to situate extreme verbal provocation within a complex, evolving set of discourses 'con-joined' to the economic and political, directing attention to a linguistic moment which illuminates the emergence and current vitality of inflammatory speech.

Marc Amfreville's chapter gives a reading of Sapphire's *Push* (1996) with reference to what Butler, in her 2011 Neale Wheeler Watson lecture, refers to as "the obligation of proximity". She thus raises the question of the ethical necessity for a closeness to precariousness, while also advocating an indispensable distance from the subject of our concern: empathy rather than sympathy. Amfreville asks how *Push* manages to plunge its reader into the mind of a sixteen-year old victim of incest, while maintaining a non-voyeuristic stance. To Amfreville, the answer lies in the very act and form of narration. *Push*, for all its apparently spontaneous, candid, often obscene appearances, is a carefully wrought narrative, informed by the recognition and staging of various mechanisms that make it a telling example of how literature can transcend its own documentary value to achieve aesthetic and ethical relevance. Amfreville draws his theoretical input from the theory of trauma, and more precisely from Freud's early and little-read "Pro-