

# Frames of Precarity

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*Barely tolerated,  
living on the margin  
In our technological society,  
we were always  
having to be rescued  
On the brink of destruction...*  
John Ashbery,  
'Soonest Mended'

Annie  
McClanahan  
identifies the subject:  
*who exactly is the "we"  
implied by accounts of  
neoliberal subjectivity?*  
They are *white, educated,  
professionally employed  
citizens in the  
developed world.*  
*Tenure-track  
humanities professors  
are both the  
vanguard of –  
the frontier, the  
pioneer, the coloniser  
of labour forms –  
and the loudest voices  
against precarity.* Sarah  
Brouillette writes that  
*neoliberalism signals the  
introduction... of conditions  
from which one might have  
thought a certain level of  
education and privilege  
served as protection...  
the professoriate.*

Precarity  
is constituted  
by systematic  
distraction. It is based  
on historical forgetfulness,  
geographical myopia,  
disciplinary silos, class blindness,  
ontological homogenisation and the  
twisted play of misdirection from  
the constant material erosion  
of common life.

Lauren Berlant  
argues that  
*Precarity as a political  
slogan also seemed to be a  
continuation of the predictable  
pattern in which ordinary  
contingencies of material and  
fantasmatic life associated  
with proletarian labour –  
related subjectivity  
became crises when they  
hit the bourgeoisies,  
which is when crises  
tend to become general  
in mass political terms,  
it seems. Precarious politics  
also signified a shift (that I'm  
genuinely ambivalent about)  
from an idiom of power to an  
idiom of care as ground for  
what needs to change to better  
suture the social.*

When  
we talk  
about precarity,  
who are we? We are  
sitting in a meeting  
at the university.  
Now, my screen split  
between a face-full video  
conference and a glowing  
white page, I am listening  
to the union explain cuts  
enforced by management.  
Judith Butler, in her  
seminal essay 'Precarious  
Life,' sits in a meeting.  
She listens but cannot  
discern whether the  
university press director  
*identified with the point of  
view from which the story  
was told, or whether he  
was relaying the bad news  
reluctantly.*  
Butler wonders whether  
this is the question of  
the humanities itself:  
*no one knows who  
is speaking and  
in what voice,  
and with what  
intent? Does  
anyone stand by  
the words  
they utter?*

All these diversions are deliberate  
disorganizations of the increasingly immiserated working  
classes and the proletarianised middle classes. They are  
solvents to solidarity. The paradoxical frame of precarity is that  
it is both a universal condition and the fragmentation of  
counter-struggles.

SCOTT  
ROBINSON

The compact between universities and capital was cemented by US imperialism as the imperative to fight the Cold War led to an injection of funding and the opening of universities to working class students. As Cold War imperatives staled, consumer credit replaced government support with student debt enrolments. Simon Torracinta describes universities now as *sprawling conglomerates: an equity fund, a real estate empire, a private hospital, a football team, an apparel company, a brand licensing agency, and an event space, with a little teaching on the side*. The security of the university was tied to the security of the US empire. Precarity was, for a time, secured offshore.

Precarity is the condition of life on the edge of disaster, universalised. The distinction between disasters is occluded as the worst possible scenario is hypostatised into the condition of humanity as such.

The neoliberal justification for our automatic consent to its governmental order similarly assumes a baseline of the worst possible world: Hobbesian anarchy without recourse to cooperation. The market is one such device but the authoritarian state is equally important: *However much we relish the invisible hand, we may still require the strong arm*. We are infantilized to the point that we can be effectively distracted by one hand (the free market) while the other forces us into submission.

*... among men, there are very many, that think themselves wiser, and abler to govern the Publique, than the rest... and thereby bring it to Distraction and Civill warre... Dejection subjects a man to causeless fears.*

Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*

The frame of precarity slips from a university meeting to imperialism. Is it really commensurable to this task, or have we been diverted? Being diverted need not be a bad thing. Salar Mohandesi points to the re-framing of academic labour in industrial terms: from the ivory tower to the assembly line. But for Mohandesi, the positive industrialisation of academic labour cannot occur without a shift in theorizing intellectual work itself. The university must be de-throned before it can be salvaged. We can become “*technicians*”, *inside the theoretical framework of class composition*, as Sergio Bologna proposed. But management has its own techniques. Henry Ford II called for industrial relations to be conducted with *the same technical skill and determination that the engineer brings to mechanical problems*. For Mike Davis, this meant transferring *the mental content of skill to management which atomised worker solidarity*.

The social order of neoliberalism is just so long as there is social order. The condition of bare life, which, they argue, everyone would prefer to death. Death is life over the edge; at least precarious life hangs on by its nails. The means to achieve social order are irrelevant, and the distribution of goods, they insist, is not the decisive issue. Look away from inequality. Our interests are determined ahead of time, without our input. This is what it means to be subject to precarious life. It is also what it means to be condescended with the assumption that precarious lives *vote against their “interests”*, as Asad Haider writes. We assume we know what populations interests are based on reifications of their identity: ‘white working class Americans’, for example. But this distracts us from *the decomposition and disorganization of the working class* and the failure to re-organise it.

The faces of dictators mingle with petty tyrants of the office, and subaltern crowds mass into frame. The theorisation of obligation – framed by liberal charity – assumes that *“we” have such obligation to “others” and presume to know who “we” are in such an instance.* For Butler, “we” are constituted by this relation of alterity, which is not primarily a relationship of vulnerability but one of power. It is vulnerability imposed precisely by that relation of power. And the act of identifying who “we” are occludes the processes of power that separate human identities in any given struggle. The identity is assumed to precede the struggle.

The sphere of reproduction is constantly eclipsed by focus on production. It is true at the level of the body, which has become inhabited by capital and modified by it. New markets for bodily tissues make the composition of the organism precarious. The hand begins to think and the head begins to manipulate tools. New technical conditions render bodies available for circulation, like images; an organ, blood, egg or infant re-framed by an extractive apparatus.

The risk of vague appeals to an ill-defined subject is that they quickly become a sites of endless dissimulation.

Organizing to harness power for the materially disenfranchised is overtaken by the requirement to accept our positions of continuous vulnerability in the face of either an anonymous yet totalizing Other, or an unrecognised or absent figure of exclusion. Both of these ‘figures’ dominate the perception of a problem as irremediable. The abstract subject of representation, Esther Leslie argues, *is played as if it were a response to a popular demand, but in actuality, it is a tactic of rule, through a setting of the parts against each other, with phony factors not always able to articulate what it is they hate so much or love so much... distracting through endless talk, as if it mattered what we – in whose name, we are told, they act – think.* It is possible, Butler suggests, to identify a subject to Western imperialism who is at once *the spoils of war and the targets of war at the same time.*

Butler cites Walter Benjamin’s essay on the conditions of *reproducibility*, which produces a near *full deterioration in context.* Transplantationalienates by distraction, cutting vital cords.

But for Hannah Forsyth, this analysis precisely lends itself to the reproduction of the image of a lost university, distracting the utopian possibility of education *by looking back to the elite university... where knowledge itself was elite* and not subject to mass availability. What matters is who owns the means of reproduction.

The University is a fortress against the reproducibility of knowledge, damming the fugitive possibilities always *in the margin.*

For Walter Benjamin, bourgeois captivity by art objects presumes a beholder’s *concentration and contemplation.* The beholder is occupied by the object they possess.

The very act of concentration is one of the *ways of averting one’s gaze,* as Fred Moten writes of Adrian Piper.

*What if the beholder glances, glances away, driven by aversion as much as desire?* The beholder is the subject of *conviction:* decisiveness radiates from the artwork, and from the act of aesthetic judgment. It is a reprieve from the enveloped world and yet at the same time *convicts.* The beholder is (trans)fixed in isolation, protected from distraction—and so, the fantasy goes, protected from precarious attention.

With a flash, the *instantaneous moment of framing* decides decades of political fractures. Michael Fried called such *instantaneousness* grace. The beholder, Moten argues, is *lost in the very act of finding himself, the place where loss constitutes the foundation of self-possession*. By losing its affiliation with anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-sexist struggles, the white working class re-founded a protectionist reaction on the soil and blood of exclusion and inequality. Precarity frames a subject defined by its own undoing, by its being subject to the processes of undoing, its inability to combine.

For Butler, the precariousness of humanity is *not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is rather that which limits the success of any representational practice*. Democratic politics constantly struggles over the definition of the people, as Chantal Mouffe and Astra Taylor note in different ways. *Populism* is both a response to and affirmation of a reactionary definition of the people; it is both a rejection of the static definition of a democratic subject, and its fixation by exactly the tactics of distraction and avoidance that prevent the question being settled once and for all.

Imperial photography takes the existence of the object as simply given to the gaze. For Ariella Azoulay, imperialism relies on the reproducibility of its neutral procedure of expropriation while its subjects are *assumed and confirmed* as expropriable. Borders continue to operate according to the logic of the shutter: *the operation of the shutter commands zero degrees of neutrality because whatever comes from its operation is already stripped bare of its singularity, its singular way of being part of the world*.

Azoulay's definition of imperialism is paradoxical: imperialism distributes *retentiveness: the ability to retain the outcome of imperial violence as fact, as what is, what one is, and what one has*. The imperialist subject is defined by a *criminal ontology*, Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos propose. This criminality imposes and origin from which one can never wholly depart. It is sustained by what they call *the ongoing willingness to annihilate all signs of the Indigenous sovereign-gathering-we*.

Between 1833 and 2015, the British Government remained fixated on paying reparations to slave owners after it legislated abolition. This payment ossified the prehistory of slaves as property. The British Government claims that this means its taxpayers *helped abolish slavery*. When Haiti won its independence, the French colonial government extorted 150 million francs in compensation and for diplomatic recognition. Haiti borrowed money to pay, and only finished paying back the interest in 1947.

Butler seems to ask whether we can hold two images in our heads, tolerating the *difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent... to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform*. Butler writes as if this is the work of the humanities, and so the investigation of imperial modes of representation returns to the site of its production and critique. The university, like financial markets, fuels itself by such self-dealing circles. Precarity is one of its currencies. At first we are told we are staring into the heart of the human condition: mutual vulnerability ruined by inequality. But then Butler tells us we are staring at the *vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense*. The vacuum of representation is safely re-occupied. The frame comes to dominate and distract from what is in fact framed. Precarity frames the disappearance of precarious life.