

Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard (eds.). *Narrating “Precariousness”: Modes, Media, Ethics.* Heidelberg: Winter, 2014, 138 pp., € 26.00.

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The title of this collection of richly suggestive essays contains the paradox at its core: On the one hand, it seeks to engage the conceptual term ‘precariousness’ and to enlarge its usefulness beyond Judith Butler’s employment of it in her 2004 volume *Precarious Life* where, the editors observe, Butler falls prey to “some imprecisions” (9) in conflating the general vulnerability of human life with the specific unequal distribution of the potential of suffering and its ethical consequences. On the other hand, the essays focus on how precarious worlds and precarious selves – the two categories into which the editors have grouped them – are mediated in narrative. Narrative and conceptual analysis are normally considered two diametrically opposed discourse formations; hence, the title of the collection might have been phrased more accurately not as *Narrating “Precariousness”*, but as *Narrating Precariousness*.

The vast possibilities for narrating precariousness are indeed explored across these ten essays and across a diverse set of media: the novel, photography, video games, graphic novels, film, rap, poetry, and drama. Such a plethora of forms induces the reviewer to step gingerly while seeking to respond to the entire volume. No reader can master all the media or all the texts discussed in these essays; what remains, then, is to consider possible lines of convergence or continuity among various essays that invite further reflection. Three such observations suggest themselves above all:

(1) ‘Precariousness’ remains a versatile (or, if you will, underdefined) term. Lena Steveker, in “Precarious Selves in Contemporary British War Novels”, makes a sharp distinction between “trauma readings” that seek to follow their subjects in working through their traumata to the point of reintegration, and her own “ethical reading” which will highlight the manner in which war disrupts the self conceptually and linguistically (21). Steveker demonstrates this disruption effectively in pointing to Pat Barker’s World War One novels, in which a supposedly stable self is called into question precisely by becoming aware of the vulnerability of the other in the context of trench warfare. By contrast, Marc Amfreville’s analysis of Sapphire’s 1996 text *Push*, the tale of an abused young woman who slowly comes to master the language she requires to narrate the ordeals perpetrated on her young body, relies on (admittedly relatively unknown) texts by Sigmund Freud, in

which the psychoanalytical concepts of *Bahnung*, *Nebenmensch*, and *Hilflosigkeit* are enlisted in explaining how the protagonist will “overcome trauma” (109). Trauma studies and the refusal of trauma analysis clearly can both occur under the rubric of ‘precariousness.’ Apparently, ‘precariousness’ is large enough to encompass the ethical aspects raised by trauma and also the evocation – without a resolution – of the daily uncertainty of living in the world, which Heidegger, who is incidentally not cited by any of the essayists, called *Geworfenheit*. Perhaps Elisabeth Angel-Perez’s essay about the representation of precarious lives on the contemporary English stage comes closest to embodying the openness of the term: in defining today’s theatre as “post-tragic”, Angel-Perez calls attention to the fact that dramatists do not seek to restore order but instead to expose “unhealed fractures and traumas” (125). They do this, ironically, by an “elision of monstration” (126); that is to say, by not showing but instead by narrating precarious lives, thus making the invisibility of the precarious subject all the more visible.

(2) Making ‘precariousness’ a more current term in our discipline may well make our criticism more honest even while challenging the professional distance we have all learned to adopt *vis-à-vis* our objects of study. In essence, I might provocatively summarize, we need to recognize that our objects of study are, in fact, frequently subjects. Amfreville, again, rightly asks, “Would not our work gain in relevance if we grounded our attention in the awareness of our own vulnerability?” (115). This important rhetorical question can be found behind other essays as well. Barbara Kowalczyk, in “The Texture of Devastation: Philip Jones Griffith’s Vietnam Trilogy”, asks it implicitly in pondering the ethical appeal that photos of destroyed lives make to the viewer, grounding herself in Susan Sontag’s familiar argument in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Stephanie Hoppeler and Gabriele Rippl, in their study of how graphic novels have narrated the phenomenon of radioactivity both as power and as ultimate destruction, similarly insist that “text-picture combinations lend themselves to present the unrepresentable” (68) and that pictures might make us feel more deeply affected in our centers of empathetic emotion than words alone ever could. Again, awareness of the vulnerable self seems to be an important precondition to doing studies in precariousness. Facing the risk of vulnerability head-on, argues Stephan Lacqué in his essay on Mike Leigh’s film *Naked*, is precisely the attitude of the rigorously classical cynic, a person who speaks without reserve or self-regard to the point of *parrhesia* and who thus exposes himself precariously. This, of course, is authentic cynicism in the Foucauldian sense, not the hypocritical, self-protective mask of the usual contemporary cynic rightly critiqued as inauthentic by Peter Sloterdijk.

(3) Precariousness and global awareness are ineluctably linked. Ellen Den-
gel-Janic uses the novels of Amitav Ghosh to explore precariousness far beyond

Butler's original concept. The people living in the Ganges Delta regions of India and Bangladesh do indeed lead precarious lives, and their risk of vulnerability is indeed "unequally distributed" (cf. 9) in comparison to many other denizens of our planet, but in this case the precariousness is largely a result of the immense forces of nature, namely floods which seasonally destroy land and throw it up again. In this sense, Dengel-Janic's essay is more specifically concerned with the "postcolonial geographies" than with the precariousness also evoked in her title. In what is perhaps the most far-reaching of all the essays in this volume, Rudolph Glitz, in "Facing the Feral Child: Precarious Futures in Three Popular Science-Fiction Narratives", makes a predominantly cultural studies argument that claims applicability of the idea of precariousness. Referring back to Levinas's insistence on the 'face' as the instrument that appeals to our awareness of precariousness and challenges our humanistic response – a position which Butler endorses and develops further – Glitz wonders if the 'faces' of feral children as represented in George Miller's film *Road Warrior*, James Cameron's *Aliens* and the 2007 computer game *BioShock* really function in this way. His provisional answer is surprising. The feral 'faces' we encounter in these stories are not at all "the face proper" (45), because the films and the game lead us to prefer the innocent victimized child over the potentially dangerous child perceived as a threat, though both may be situated precariously. In a second step, Glitz engages with Lee Edelman's well-known critique of future scenarios which, to Edelman, appear exclusively determined by heteronormative reproductiveness devoted to a sentimental view of the child as such, and in this sense deeply inimical to queer sexualities. Glitz adroitly dismantles this assertion, concluding that both Butler's and Edelman's theories are held in check by the variety of future representations that actually exist. Glitz concludes ringingly, "representation as such is not the problem, but rather certain representations – representations that are best fought by means of other representations" (52).

The two essays least specifically indebted to a Butlerian understanding of 'precariousness' are Jagna Oltarzewska's "Hearing Eminem" and H       Aji's meditation on the "[p]oetics of [p]recariousness" in Lyn Hejinian. Yet for all their conceptual distance, these two essays speak to each other. Both evoke the performative – that is, narrative – dimension of the precarious condition: for Eminem, this performativity is realized in the in-your-face profanity and sexual suggestiveness of his raps which reveal their source in the rapper's own precarious and poverty-ridden origins; for Hejinian, it resides in the potential of her particular form of LANGUAGE poetry to both assert and destabilize meaning in her difficult poetic lines. Poetry, whether highly stylized or rhythmically insistent, speaks of precarious conditions in evoking them. I would not necessarily subscribe either to Aji's assertion that Language Poets have made a "deliberate

choice of formal poetics over free verse” (117) or, for that matter, to Oltarzewska’s interpretation that Eminem’s “bending of rhymes [...] mimics the elasticity of the narrator’s morals” (101), but these are small quibbles. Seen together, the essays in this volume test the usefulness of the concept ‘precariousness’ in bringing ethical considerations to bear on the academic analysis of texts. They also amply demonstrate the difficulty that comes with the effort of not losing focus on the human(e) dimension of the experiences represented in the texts. There is no question that ‘precariousness’ both as thematic preoccupation and as philosophical concept can yield insights and might, with some luck, again restore more of the ‘human’ to the humanities worn out by the theory wars.