

Cultural Geographies of Precarity

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In recent years, precarity has emerged as a key concept in the social and political sciences. The concept stems from the work of political theorists such as Judith Butlerⁱ and Lauren Berlantⁱⁱ, which distinguishes between *precariousness*, an inherent state of vulnerability and dependence resulting from the relational structure of society, and *precarity*, a political condition that is the consequence of uneven power relations, and refers to the exacerbation of the precariousness of some subjects as compared to others.

In geographical scholarship, precarity has primarily been explored in relation to the disintegration of security within labour marketsⁱⁱⁱ. This has been particularly pertinent, especially in the Global North context, in the aftermath of the 2008 recession and ensuing culture of austerity^{iv}. However, there remains limited attention regarding how precarity has been *culturally*, as well as socially and economically, entrenched. This is despite the fact that, as we argue, the reproduction of precarious conditions is now, perhaps most significantly, a cultural reproduction, operating through imaginaries of and assumptions about how day to day life is, and should be, lived. This special issue therefore provides timely perspectives on the cultural geographies of precarity. It does so in two key ways. Firstly, it highlights how precarity is mediated through a set of collective affects and imaginaries that both normalise and actively celebrate precarious modes of living in contemporary society, by branding them, for example, as innovative, flexible and entrepreneurial^v.

Secondly, the special issue examines the role of precarity in constructions and experiences of the everyday^{vi}, including, in particular, attempts at homemaking in compromised conditions^{vii}. This is not to say that these two elements, collective affects and imaginaries, and everyday domestic lifeworlds, should be understood as distinct. Rather, as distinguishable conceptual tools, they illuminate interlinked but varied formations of precarity. Here in the introduction we outline the papers that constitute this special issue, before highlighting their contributions to a cultural geographies of precarity and arguing for the importance of that cultural geographies approach.

The issue opens with Mara Ferreri and Gloria Dawson's paper, which focuses on property guardianships in London, a form of short-term building security whereby 'guardians' apply to live temporarily in vacant properties. Through interviews with guardians and analysis of media and marketing materials, they highlight how property guardianships brand precarity as an adventurous and desirable form of urban living. Next, in her exploration of regeneration projects in post-crash Detroit, Emma Fraser brings to light how imaginaries of the city as a site of urban decay and ruination, and imaginaries of its future potentials for growth and change, also work to erase the worlds of the 'old' residents that remain in Detroit.

Following on from Fraser's exploration of precarity on an urban scale, Solange Munoz investigates the role of precarity in the micro-spaces of everyday domestic life for migrant squatters living in Buenos Aires' informal hotels. Through in-depth analysis of everyday domestic routines and objects, Munoz highlights the gendered dimensions of precarity whereby women, usually at the fore of caregiving and domestic responsibilities, are unevenly impacted by precarious domestic settings.

Finally, Oli Mould's paper examines the material precarity of the now-defunct Calais 'Jungle'. He posits the Jungle as a dualistic place, a site whose precarity evoked creativity,

'autogestion' and acts of alternative home-making, as well as uncertainty, violence and despair.

Together, these four papers expose and explore the importance of a cultural geographies perspective on precarity. In particular we want to highlight five key cultural dimensions of precarity's operations and reproduction in the contemporary climate that are drawn out through the special issue; imaginaries, temporality, micro space-times, affective materialities and place.

Firstly, both Fraser and Ferreri and Dawson's papers illuminate the centrality of imaginaries in the processes through which precarity is made sense of and reproduced. Fraser deftly identifies interrelated imaginaries at work in post decline Detroit. She depicts how 'ruin porn' imaginaries glamorize Detroit's decaying landscape, readying the city for a gentrification then enacted through imaginaries of regeneration and 'greening'. She also, importantly, questions what and who is left out of, and thereby erased by, these imaginaries, arguing that longstanding Detroit residents, and specifically black and working class residents, are not included in the visions of the future city, and that the imaginaries of regrowth at work in Detroit thereby reproduce their precarity.

As well as mediating precarity in particular settings, we argue that imaginaries play a crucial role in making sense of and entrenching precarity as a 'new normal'. The papers of this special issue all speak to this conjecture, demonstrating ways in which precarity is coming to be expected and/or accepted in a contemporary world defined by 'crisis ordinary'^{viii} and 'moods' of austerity^{ix}. Relatedly, they show how precarity has moved beyond situations and peoples commonly understood as precarious, as for example explored by Mould and Munoz, to impact on middle class citizens of the Global North, as highlighted by Fraser, and Ferreri and Dawson.

Furthermore, beyond demonstrating how precarity is entrenched as a 'new normal', Fraser and Ferreri and Dawson's papers illuminate, importantly, how precarious conditions are in fact being glamorized and celebrated^x through imaginaries that give precarious conditions a positive inflection. As Ferreri and Dawson's nuanced analysis of property guardianship highlights, imaginaries of flexibility, urban adventure and resourcefulness sugarcoat precarious living conditions so that their precarity is in fact *not* experienced primarily as precarity^{xi}. This encourages a 'self-precaritisation' of middle class young people in London at a time of widespread housing crisis by normalizing, even glamorizing insecure urban living. Equally, the papers demonstrate the co-existence of competing, sometimes conflicting imaginaries of precarious subjects. The papers trace the fine line between autonomy and individualism, exploring on the one hand, imaginaries of 'the precariat' as a radical figure, capable of acts of 'autogestion', as Mould outlines, and, on the other, how precarious neoliberal subjectivities are reimaged through ideas of individuality and flexibility.

Secondly, and relatedly to the importance of imaginaries, the papers reflect and advance debates around temporal dimensions of precarity. Precarity is often understood as a temporal or rhythmic phenomenon^{xii} defined by erratic and uncertain rhythms as well as by a necessitated short termism. The papers reiterate this, while also exploring other temporal dimensions of precarity, including the relationship between precarity and imaginaries of past and future. For Munoz, and Ferreri and Dawson, precarious lives are shown to be, as commonly conceptualised, lives lived erratically, and on hold, as energies are channelled into to short term processes of 'getting by' rather than to long term decision making. Yet for Mould the precarity of the Calais Jungle is focused around the teleological force of an imagined future, of life in the UK, and for Fraser, precarity is enacted through assertions of what belongs to the future of Detroit, and what should be relegated to its past.

As such, these papers suggest the importance of exploring how imagined futures can sustain hope within, but also produce and reproduce, precarious conditions.

Thirdly, the special issue orientates geographers towards the micro-spatiotemporalities of precarity, shedding light on precarious geographies that are domestic, personal and everyday. In Munoz's paper on precarious homemaking in Argentina, it is clear that precarity, further than relating to broad questions around housing security, is infused into minute practices of homemaking^{xiii}. Munoz shows how precarity is lived through daily negotiations over sharing hot water and sleeping space with strangers, or shielding children from dangerous or unpleasant social situations. Her paper in particular outlines the importance of a microgeographies of precarity, that is attentive to the ways in which the traumas of precarious lives are felt in mundane, daily routines.

Fourthly, the papers explore the centrality of materialities in the affective dimensions of precarious geographies^{xiv}. For Munoz's participants, everyday experiences of precarity are mediated through objects such as kettles, showers and beds so that these objects become focal points for the anxieties, fears and stresses of life in precarious conditions. Mould, meanwhile, explores how the materialities of buildings in the Calais Jungle embody affective orientations of hope, demonstrating the utopian promises of "autogestion" and alternative place making. At the same time, the buildings are at the centre of attempts to unmake the Jungle through domicidal demolitions^{xv}, given that they can 'be easily dismantled and destroyed' and thereby bolster the camp's atmospheric as well as material precarity. In demonstrating how affective dimensions of precarity are embedded in the materialities of specific sites, the special issue speaks to the conjecture of Ben Anderson that precarity operates as both a structure of feeling, pervasive to the contemporary world and as a series of localized and locally differentiated atmospheres and affects.

Lastly, all four papers demonstrate the importance of precarity in understanding place in the contemporary world, which has long been a core concern of cultural geographers^{xvi}. They show how processes of place making^{xvii} and unmaking^{xviii} (Baxter and Brickell 2014, Nowicki 2014) are also processes of producing ,reproducing and resisting precarity, and elucidate how affective experiences of precarity, or of related imaginaries such as flexibility, mediate experiences of place for different subjects.

This special issue is pertinent at a time when, in popular culture and public discourse, it is now recognised that precarity permeates across all elements of life, not constrained merely to labour economies. Geographical scholarship on precarity needs to reflect this too, and this special issue contributes to the development of a broader geography of precarity, specifically advancing a cultural geographies approach. In particular, the papers demonstrate the importance of focusing on imaginative and affective elements of precarity, as well as on the layering of competing imaginaries and experiences of precarious places and avenues out of them.

The issue also highlights the multitude of formats and contexts in which precarity exists, and that we as scholars need to acknowledge the differing ways in which precarity is imagined and reproduced, as well as finding commonalities between them.

Ultimately, there are important political stakes in understanding the cultural geographies of precarity. Firstly, acknowledging and analysing the various imaginaries through which precarity is being reproduced and normalized means we are better equipped to approach it critically. Secondly, attention to the methods people use to cope with precarity on a day-to-day basis enables us to unearth important resistive tools, already being deployed, in the fight for better, fairer ways of living.

Perhaps most significantly, this special issue makes the case for the importance of exploring arenas in which precarity is being normalised and glamorized. Without recognising such processes of entrenchment, we run the risk of sleepwalking into a world in which precarity is an accepted element of the everyday. A cultural geographies perspective on precarity is invaluable in examining and challenging precarity as a new normal, which, in an increasingly precarious world, is a key concern for future geographical scholarship.

Notes

i Butler, J. 2009. *Frames of War*. London: Verso.

ii Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

iii See for example Standing, G. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Waite, L. 2009. A Place and Space for a Critical Geography of Precarity? *Geography Compass*, 3(1): 412-433; Gill, R and Pratt, A. 2008. In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7-8): 1-30.

iv Peck, J. 2012. Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy, *City*, 16(6): 626-655.

v See Ferreri, M., Dawson, G. and Vasudevan, A. 2017. Living precariously: property guardianship and the flexible city. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42 (2): 246–259; Harris, E., 2016. "Precarious times and nonlinear thinking: Using i-Docs to explore the temporary city" *I-Docs Blog* ; Harris, E., 2015. "Navigating Pop-up Geographies: Urban Space-Times of Flexibility, Interstitiality and Immersion" *Geography Compass*, 9(11): 592-603

vi Ettliger, N. 2007. Precarity Unbound. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 32(3): 319-340.

vii Burrell, K. 2014. Spilling Over from the Street: Contextualizing Domestic Space in an Inner City Neighbourhood. *Home Cultures*, 11(2): 145-166.

viii Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

ix See Coleman, R. 2016. "Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood" *New Formations* (87), pp. 83-101; Bramall, R., 2013. *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies .

x Harris, E., Nowicki, M and Brickell, K. Forthcoming. "On-edge in the Impasse: Inhabiting the housing crisis as Structure-of-Feeling" *Geoforum*,

xi See Harris, E., 2015. "Navigating Pop-up Geographies: Urban Space-Times of Flexibility, Interstitiality and Immersion" *Geography Compass*, 9(11): 592-603; Harris, E., Nowicki, M and Brickell, K. Forthcoming. "On-edge in the Impasse: Inhabiting the housing crisis as Structure-of-Feeling" *Geoforum*,

xii See Sharma, S., 2014. *In the Meantime, Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; Berlant et al 2012. "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with

Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejic, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Anna Vujanovic”
The Drama Review, 56(4): 163-177

xiii See also Munoz, S. 2017. Urban Precarity and Home: There Is No “Right to the City”,
Annals of the Association of American Geographers. Online first:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2017.1392284>

xiv Anderson, B., 2014. *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*. Durham:
Ashgate; Anderson, B., 2014. *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*.
Durham: Ashgate.

xv Nowicki, M. 2014. Rethinking Domicide: Towards an Expanded Critical Geography of
Home, *Geography Compass*, 8(11): 785-795

xvi Pioneered in the works of scholars such as Tim Cresswell and Peter Jackson: Cresswell, T.
2014. *Place: An Introduction* (2nd edition). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; Jackson, P. 1989. *Maps of
Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*. London: Routledge.

xvii Harris, E., 2015. “Navigating Pop-up Geographies: Urban Space-Times of Flexibility,
Interstitiality and Immersion” *Geography Compass*, 9(11): 592-603; Ferreri, M., Dawson, G.
and Vasudevan, A. 2017. Living precariously: property guardianship and the flexible city.
Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 42 (2): 246–259.

xviii For further discussion on the concept of ‘home unmaking’, see Baxter, R and Brickell,
K. 2014. For Home *Un Making*. *Home Cultures*, 11(2): 133-143; Nowicki, M. 2014.
Rethinking Domicide: Towards an Expanded Critical Geography of Home, *Geography
Compass*, 8(11): 785-795