

# Precarious Writings

## Reckoning the Absences and Reclaiming the Legacies in the Current Poetics/Politics of Precarity

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Scholarly debates over precarity are gaining unprecedented visibility across fields. From labor insecurity forming a growing dangerous class to the existential condition of vulnerability induced by millennial capitalism, precarity has become an object of both empirical study and theoretical reflection. While European social movements have been organizing and writing about precarity from the late 1970s to today, still, from the US perspective, the term precarity might be mistakenly taken as strictly a scholarly invention. “Precarious Writings” offers an important corrective to the ways that precarity has been taken up in anthropology and cognate disciplines, addressing the specific epistemological and political limitations of existing usages and returning the concept to its overlooked grassroots history in social movement struggles in southern Europe. By returning precarity to these activist roots, this paper makes the case for the recognition of social movements as knowledge producers as well as sources of theoretical insight and innovation in their own right. By failing to recognize precarity’s development within contentious struggles, scholarly uses miss how the activist notion enables identity reformulations toward a kind of “precarity pride.” That is, the politicization of insecurity has become a source for nurturing a fluid space of political creation.

*A decade before Guy Standing wrote The Precariat (2014), the precariat had already named itself. In the Fall of 2004 in London, anti-globalization activists drafted “The Middlesex Declaration of Europe’s Precariat,” a manifesto that set forth a call for a Pan-European May Day and listed a set of basic demands. . . . Although Standing doesn’t acknowledge his intellectual debt to the movement . . . what needs to be done is to rescue its theoretical legacy.* (<https://redeinvestigadores.wordpress.com/manifesto/>)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: Precarity and Its Activist Theorizations

*Feminist Squatted Building in Downtown Madrid, June 2004, 4 p.m.*

On a hot summer afternoon, I was waiting at the doors of an old two-story building located on Embajadores Street, at the heart of the picturesque neighborhood of Lavapiés. Previously a bakery, this building had been abandoned for several years when a group of women unexpectedly took it over in 1996. Responding to their call for help in reconstruction, volunteers from various countries as well as some local architects came in to fix the building, the whole squatting operation attracting the attention of neighbors and national newspapers.

The building was named Eskalera Karacola after its old circular stairs; the name is still written in graffiti on the walls of the building (see fig. 1). Since it was first squatted in, this emblematic physical space has hosted a feminist social center. Financed by a bar, a vegan restaurant, and a tearoom, all in situ, this old building has hosted many activities, including reading groups, workshops, a social movement’s library, and international events, such as parts of the second Zapatista global gathering.

1. See also Foti (2017).

What brought me to this unique place, which a year after my visit came under a municipal order of eviction after 10 years of high levels of activity? The reason I had for standing at its doors on such a hot day, admiring the colorful businesses of this street filled with small call centers, old tapas bars, coffee shops, and migrant-run groceries, was to meet one of the writers of a compelling book on “precarity” released early that year by Traficantes de Sueños (Dream Traffickers).<sup>2</sup>

This book, *Drifting through the Circuits of Feminine Precarity (A la Deriva: Por los Circuitos de la Precariedad Femenina)*; see fig. 2), written by the Precarias a la Deriva (2004) project, contained many of the hypotheses, calls, and tactics elaborated on by “precarity movements” in southern Europe. The issues of rising unemployment, the side effects of flexible labor, and ensuing insecurity have been framed as precarity by autonomous struggles in Europe since the long wave of economic transformation starting in the late 1970s and lasting to today. In recent years, precarity has become an oft-debated topic in

2. Traficantes de Sueños is a worker-managed press with all its publications under creative commons licenses. It also houses militant research projects and autonomous political education programs, all run by a collective of local activists in Madrid (<https://www.traficantes.net/>).

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Figure 1. Eskalera Karakola, a renowned feminist squat building in downtown Madrid, 2002. Creative Commons Public Domain (CCO).

the English-speaking academy, and in our discipline, precarity got its own entry in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Kasmir 2018). While providing insightful contributions, most current academic engagements with precarity often remain distanced from these social movements' own long use and politicization of the term. Precisely to point out how the term has an alternative trajectory, I recall this memory of meet-

ing with participants of this squatted feminist social center who themselves have been organizing, researching, and writing about the question of precarity. Still, precarity might mistakenly be taken as a scholarly conceit from the US perspective since academic engagement with precarity thus far has mostly ignored this existing discursive use of the term.

This omission has consequences for the very notion of precarity that is currently unfolding in the Anglo-Saxon academy, with undertones of overwhelming despair about increasing vulnerability leading to depoliticization and further individualization. "Precarious Writings" offers an important corrective to the ways that precarity has been taken up in anthropology and cognate disciplines, addressing the specific epistemological and political limitations of existing usages and returning the concept to its overlooked (or ignored) grassroots history in social movement struggles in southern Europe.

What can we say about precarity after taking movements seriously that we cannot say without doing so? By returning precarity to its activist roots, this paper makes the case for the recognition of social movements as knowledge producers and sources of theoretical insight and innovation in their own right. By failing to recognize its origins and subsequent development within contentious struggles, scholarly uses of precarity miss how the activist notion contains identity reformulations toward a kind of "precarity pride." That is, the politicization of insecurity has become a source for reconfiguring individual and collective identities, leading to a fluid space of political creation made out of unexpected alliances. Besides trouble, precarity movements flip vulnerability upside down in such a way that experiences of insecurity and dispossession lead to initiatives



Figure 2. Book cover of a monograph by Precarias a la Deriva published by activist press Traficantes de Sueños in 2003. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND).

of collective agency and organized resistance. They critically embrace the spreading condition of uncertainty as a site for rethinking how to organize collectively and for advancing alternative visions of social reorganization. Following their rich genealogy of actions, texts, and artistic interventions, it is possible to identify a series of novel organizing strategies as well as analytical and political propositions. For the sake of this paper, I recall a series of ethnographic instances when some of these, such as the tools of “picket survey,” “feminist drift,” and “May-Day party,” were in the making. Also, on reading their writings, I highlight some of their conceptual contributions to the notion of precarity by using quotes on “precarization” and “the becoming-migrant of labor.”

This paper is based on multisited ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Madrid, with several site visits to different activist group participants in precarity networks based throughout Spain, Italy, and France.<sup>3</sup> While they are place-based projects, they have developed working relationships transnationally and have produced political resonances within broader global activist networks working against neoliberal policies through horizontal practices. Thus, my work of tracing the activist uses of precarity is based on several years of translocal ethnographic engagement with different activist groups in Spain as well as with European social movement networks and beyond. Nonetheless, my main working relationship was established with *Precarias a la Deriva*, a feminist research project based in Madrid with many participants, both local and international, including me. Attending weekly meetings, preparing workshops and campaigns, and devouring the many writings produced by this group led me to a careful engagement with the textual and graphic productions coming out of the rest of the European precarity groups, and I compiled an archive of social movements’ writings on precarity, which are rather prolific. Throughout my ethnographic research process, I approached precarity movements as sources of distinct analytical and conceptual insights and thus engaged with activist texts in their own right.<sup>4</sup>

My research thus far has traced a genealogy of the multiple uses and significations of the notion of precarity as put to work by southern European movements, focusing on feminist initiatives based in Spain (Casas-Cortés 2014). In that previous work, I have identified distinct although interrelated conceptual developments advanced by movements that redefine precarity in relationship to changes in three spheres, those of production,

reproduction, and mobility. (1) First, for those focused on changes in the sphere of production, precarity means the loss of long-term employment and welfare state provisions. Yet, among those activists preoccupied with production modes, precarity captures not only quantitative losses but also paradigmatic transformations in labor under the knowledge economy. (2) Second, for other groups, precarity stretches to every corner of everyday life, representing a spreading condition of vulnerability brought on by neoliberalism and exacerbated by a failed model for redistributing care practices. (3) Last but not least, precarity is additionally understood from the perspective of migration. Taking mobility as a point of view, precarity points to the tendency toward unceasing displacement and lack of permanency.

The clustering of the multiple meanings into main tracks is not to be understood as a rigid distinction or as a chronological order. Rather, these notions of precarity have coexisted among European struggles against austerity and neoliberalism that have been tinkering with and building on each meaning. Different sectors in different places have been crisscrossing or contesting the multiple connotations of precarity. The current paper builds on this genealogy of the many meanings and movements that have composed the European precarity struggles, although it focuses this time on how these movements’ debates relate or do not relate to current academic debates. I identify overlaps and bifurcations in a productive—although yet to be realized—dialogue among strands of literature on precarity, some of which come from unexpected sites of enunciation. Beyond the pedagogical exercise of connecting extensive literature on the matter, by putting parallel productions in tandem, my intention is to restore epistemic justice to a concept with activist roots that have been neglected. From this, a rather striking understanding of precarity emerges with a distinctive gist, that is, precarity as a condition of vulnerability filled with political potential.

The paper starts with a preliminary appraisal of the European social movements that, from the late 1970s to today, have been organizing within, against, and around precarity. The remaining sections are structured according to the conceptual clustering I identify as the three main general understandings of precarity among European precarity movements, signaling how they relate to burgeoning scholarly literature in anthropology and other related disciplines on this topic. One section deals with changes in labor, the following with a more existential connotation, and the last one centers on the question of migration. The conclusion argues that when precarity is returned to its activist roots, the political potential of the concept comes to the fore. The paper then advocates for taking activist theorizations seriously, calling for a “knowledge turn” in the study of social movements.

### A Deleted Genealogy: The Many Meanings and Movements within Precarity Activism

While the term “precarity” might sound unfamiliar to most English-speaking persons, it is common parlance in southern

3. This ethnographic and archival research of social movements’ own “in-house” literature was mainly conducted during pre-doctoral dissertation fieldwork (summer of 2004) and doctoral dissertation fieldwork (2007–2008).

4. This approach beyond the object vs. subject divide (or, to put it in more disciplinary terms, the subaltern who cannot speak vs. the ethnographer who never stops writing) was inspired by the Social Movements Working Group based at the Department of Anthropology of University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. This interdisciplinary initiative advocates for relational and horizontal methodological approaches in the study of collective action (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008, 2013).



European countries with Latin-based languages. Furthermore, the term precarity has been in the discursive repertoire of social struggles in Europe since the late 1970s, gaining special visibility in the early 2000s. The etymological origin of the term has been traced in some of the movement's literature: precarity comes from the Latin root *prex-*, meaning to pray or to beg for stability and security in times of severe uncertainty or when subject to unknown conditions.<sup>5</sup> In fact, one political icon of Italian precarity collectives is a fabricated saint, San Precario (see fig. 3), recalling a humorous notion of praying for stability in finances, emotions, and health.

Precarity activism in Europe represents an emblematic instance of non-single issue organizing, where diverse struggles politicize multiple aspects of life under the gaze of precarity. This politicization originated with the arrival of part-time contracts and rising unemployment affecting southern Europe on the European Union's alignment with neoliberal policies after the oil crisis of 1977. Unions and groups of the unemployed mobilized the term precarity to denounce the loss of the wonders of the European welfare state, including long-term and stable employment with the benefits of high-quality public services. Very soon, though, the focus was on deeper transformations in labor, pointing to the inner workings of "cognitive capitalism" based on intermittent forms of employment and increasingly characterized by the managing of codes, affects, and knowledges. These types of so-called immaterial occupations, historically ascribed to artists, performers, and women, were now understood as becoming paradigmatic models of work. The influence of autonomous interpretations of labor transformations in post-Fordism led to a politicization of these sectors of the economy, with one of the more creative and prolific struggles being that of the intermittents in France. While entertainment workers and performing artists as well as researchers were politicizing under this analysis of the knowledge economy, a parallel movement emerged calling for this diverse assemblage of knowledge workers—at times referred to as the "cognitariat"—to free their means of production and their final products, that is, to liberate knowledge and research. Public opinion campaigns were organized under the slogan "sharing is good." Precarity movements started to regularly use a series of infrastructures to exchange knowledge, music, and other forms of cultural production. They attempted to free them from their status as market commodities ruled under copyright laws and turn them into pools of commons organized by distributive licenses and open-access regulations. Promptly, feminist voices within precarity movements advanced a vision of "precarization" as a process affecting society as a whole. In fact, the increasing privatization trend for all kinds of resources and services developed into a broader umbrella for struggles pointing to the precariousness of all contemporary life. This politicization spread to the questions of health care, domestic work, housing, and those aspects related to what activists referred to as "a care crisis," calling for a

5. See "Precarity Explained to Kids," available at <https://www.joaap.org/4/aviv.html>.

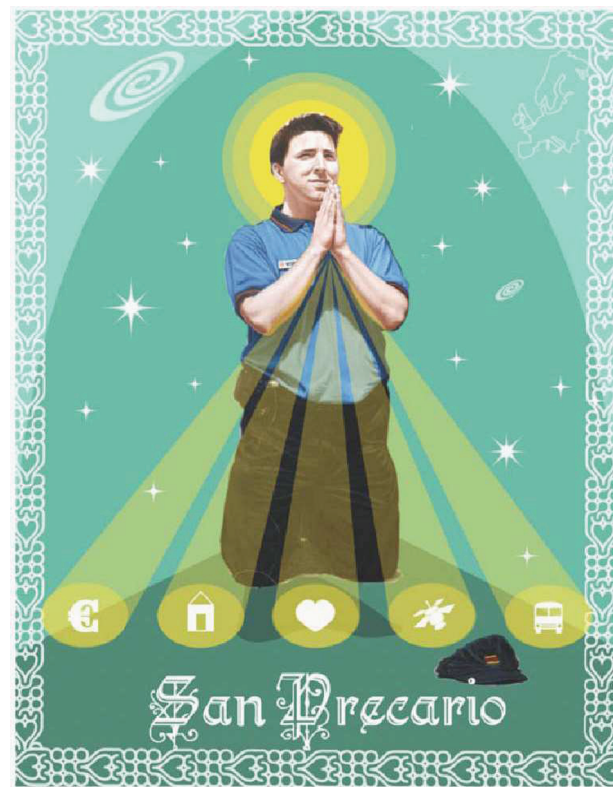


Figure 3. Icon of San Precario. Designed by CreW (<http://www.ecn.org/chainworkers/chainw/english.htm>; <https://www.deriveapprodi.com/prodotto/chainworkers/>) in 2004 in Milan and inspired by the work of the artist Chris Woods. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 1.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-SA 1.0).

"reorganization of care work" (International Women's Day Manifesto, March 8, 2007). Feminist intersectional analyses of power dynamics affecting "minorities"—including all kinds of populations different from an assumed norm—were key to opening the concept of precarity beyond a strictly labor-centered take, as well as decentering its possible Eurocentric tendencies, which entertained precarity merely as an experience affecting northern countries or a certain cluster of national middle-class youth (Federici 2008). Additionally, precarity, by building on and running parallel to those developments, became a key term for pan-European promigration advocates, who denounced the precarious nature of mobility under current EU migration laws. Precarity for migrants refers to both the risks of border crossing under a highly restricted visa system and the threats of deportation in their countries of destination. That is, questions of legality and racism exacerbate the vulnerability of undocumented migrants. When local precarious youth started to reach out to migrants' organizing efforts, a common realization developed that the conditions of constant mobility, informality, temporality, and total availability associated with migrant labor were spreading today to other workers (albeit with important hierarchies of difference). This led to a series of joint alliances under the common call of "freedom of movement" (see fig. 4).





Figure 4. EuroMayDay Poster by EuroMayDay Network, 2008. Creative Commons Public Domain (CCO).

Through these activist efforts, the term came into circulation among those affected by austerity measures and neoliberal trends adopted in the European Union. While starting as a collective expression of discontent, precarity has been resignified as a site of reinventing politics as usual. This rethinking of the political includes a reformulation of individual identity leading to a certain precarity pride able to produce shared affinities amid acute situations of social fragmentation. Furthermore, my research suggests how precarity movements are putting forward a “politics otherwise,” unfolding practices of caring alliances and a series of proposals for social reorganization to confront, or at least to deal with, what seems like an irreversible scenario under neoliberal globalization, and developing strategies for survival and sabotage amid multilayered processes of dispossession.

#### *The Precarity of Precarity*

A few years after I visited the feminist squat in Madrid and encountered the activist research book by Precarias a la Deriva, a buzz around precarity started to emerge in the US academy. Even though the term precarity is rarely used in English, the meaning of this odd-sounding noun rapidly became associated with its more common adjective form, precarious—as in uncertain, insecure, unpredictable, risky, unsafe. Still, while speaking

with the same words and addressing similar issues, those scholarly engagements with precarity that became popular in the early 2010s were far from the discussions raised by the kaleidoscopic book from 2004 published under an open-access license and signed by a militant research collective. They were talking in strikingly different terms. Within academic writings, precarity has become a truly interdisciplinary topic claimed by a number of disciplines, with different understandings and scholarship around it. While precarity has become a hot scholarly topic, prominent scholarly debates skip over the existence of self-described precarity movements (*movimenti precari*, *mouvements contre la précarité*, *luchas de la precariedad*). Most current engagements with the concept of precarity omit the discursive existence of precarity, that is, how precarity has been used and mobilized among activists in Europe. By pushing aside how European precarity movements have evoked, embodied, challenged, and reinvented this notion over a period of time, scholarly debates are missing key connotations of precarity. My work follows how precarity movements themselves unfold an open-ended concept and struggle to articulate how several processes of dispossession impact their own everyday lives, notions of temporality, stability, and expectations. Through this process of rethinking how to face such transformations, activists have developed a notion of precarity as a rallying point of departure to reinvent themselves and society. The following sections engage the different conceptual developments of precarity.

#### Precarity as Labor Insecurity

In the field of labor studies, since the late 1970s and 1980s, precarity has been understood as a product of neoliberalism, specifically flexibilization policies in labor markets. Also known as “casualization” of labor, this process leads to growing instability as a result of changes in the workplace in terms of wage stagnation, loss or reduction of benefits and protections, duration of employment, and types of contracts. This understanding of precarity is heavily influenced by the research of French sociologists in the late 1990s (Bourdieu 1998; Castel 2003).<sup>6</sup> These scholars as well as mainstream unions critically approach precarity as a question of “lack” compared with the stability, regulations, and rights acquired under the welfare state. From this critical tradition on the deterioration of labor conditions, there are currently many works explicitly using the notion of precarity to think through the generalization of contingent labor and its consequences. Some influential works include *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (Ross 2009), which is based on case studies across different geographies. Ross points to the emergence of “precarious livelihoods” shared by temps, freelancers, adjuncts, and migrants. Still, the most referenced sociological work is *The Precariat* (Standing 2011). This compound term of precarity and proletariat, along with the term *cognitariat*, was

6. Pierre Bourdieu himself was part of the earliest social expressions of discontent against precarity among earlier antineoliberal globalization movements in France.

common among precarity activists; both were used with humor more than with rigor well before the publication of *The Precariat*. Rather than a closed identity, precarity among activist circles entails multiple nuances, as this paper further explores. Still, Standing's appraisal of how a new social class is emerging and how, if unattended, it might turn to radical, dangerous options is how the term precarity has reached many.<sup>7</sup>

Parallel to or in some cases well in advance of these debates, precarity among activist circles in southern Europe was also initially associated with loss of labor security and labor rights. Historically, this connotation of precarity was true in Italy, France, and Spain during the 1980s, when the increasing scarcity of stable employment opportunities and a lack of solid financial security were attributed to the rise of part-time jobs with no benefits and fixed-term contracts. At the national level, unions mobilized under a strictly negative rendering of precarity, focusing on the loss of labor rights and thus having a nostalgic search for a golden past of a welfare state able to ensure labor protections. Still, from very early on and especially when precarity became part of pan-European organizing, its meaning and reach stretched further. The understanding of precarity mobilized by unaffiliated youth groups unfolded, encompassing multiple readings of and alternative perspectives on labor transformations.

*Atocha Train Station, Madrid, June 20, 2002, 9 a.m.*

The main trade union federations of Spain called for a general national strike as a response to the rollback of labor protections implemented under the economic parameters of the European Union. Gathered at a squatted social center in the Lavapiés neighborhood and frustrated by conventional labor movement strategies, a heterogeneous group of women—domestic workers, freelance journalists, translators, waiters, call center workers—talked about how to respond to the call to strike. They started to think of different ways to understand their own labor conditions and ways of contesting the new set of problems in the workplace. Constituting an improvised research team armed with cameras, recorders, and notebooks, this group of women dispersed throughout the city during the day of the strike to discuss and investigate the conditions of women who, like them,

inhabited those sectors where the strike made little sense: the invisible, nonregulated, temporary, undocumented, and domestic sectors of the new economy. This team conducted several informal interviews with participants of those sectors, the quick opening question being “What is your strike?” (*¿Cuál es tu huelga?*). The point of asking people how they were following the national call to strike was to openly raise the disjuncture between traditional forms of labor organizing (e.g., unions calling workers to stop laboring at factories and institutions) and the increasing reality of a transformed labor force. The goal was to emphasize the fragmentation of workplaces, as the image in figure 5, from the book by Precarias a la Deriva, evokes by presenting the city as a circuit where one laborer wanders through various points in a daily routine.

This was the beginning of a year-and-a-half-long militant research project that explored the labor transformations taking place in a Europeanizing Spain, in particular the ways in which these women with temporary jobs in an urban setting were affected. The burning goal was to address the hyperfragmentation lived by the growing number of these atypical workers. This initial survey with different women going through similar dilemmas was followed by more encounters in the form of mobile interviews tracing the everyday trajectories of one another in order to articulate better understanding as well as deepen relationships on the way. The research project lasted from mid-2002 to 2004, when the results were published in *Drifting through the Circuits of Feminine Precarity*. According to a cultural studies scholar writing on this book:

In a variety of micro-narratives, interviews, theoretical essays, and visual texts included in their book, the authors of *A la deriva* describe and examine the experience of precariousness from multiple points of view. Out of this examination there emerges a narrative of identity: a narrative that is rough, fragmentary, and sometimes even contradictory, as it tries to stay faithful to the conditions of postmodern capitalism. *Precarias* is not made up of professional authors but rather of women who are defined by the mobility of their temporary and part-time jobs, by their illegal status as migrants, or by their semiotic mobility between codes of language. (Szumilak 2006:168)

Filled with unconventional traits, their analysis was inspired by but also differs from the mainstream notion of precarity as a “garbage job” that was made popular by both the main trade unions and the sociological analyses of flexibilization policies and casual labor. Still, this common understanding of precarity equating labor changes with a lack of previous conditions and rights was eventually met with dissident voices problematizing a straightforward negative and narrow definition of precarity. One of them is the militant research project carried out by Precarias a la Deriva. The “first babbles” of this project (as they put it) started in the context of the general strike in Spain against yet another labor flexibilization law. Several women in the space of the feminist social center called Eskalera Karakola started to share their unease with the general call by the big labor unions to stop all production for 24 hours. They wanted

7. Standing is easily the most prominent English-language sociologist writing on precarity and the main interlocutor in scholarly debates on precarity. In fact, the current trajectory of sociological literature on precarity continues to engage Standing's concept in different empirical contexts (Johnson 2015), working on connecting the study of precarious labor conditions to migration (Schierup et al. 2015) and focusing on specific contingent sectors, such as creative workers (Curtin and Sanson 2016), domestic workers (Meehan and Strauss 2015), and self-employed mothers (Wilson and Yochim 2017), to name just a few examples. Some of the Standing-inspired debates on precarity are emerging in anthropology; see “Academic Precarity in American Anthropology: A Forum” (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/academic-precarity-in-american-anthropology-a-forum>).



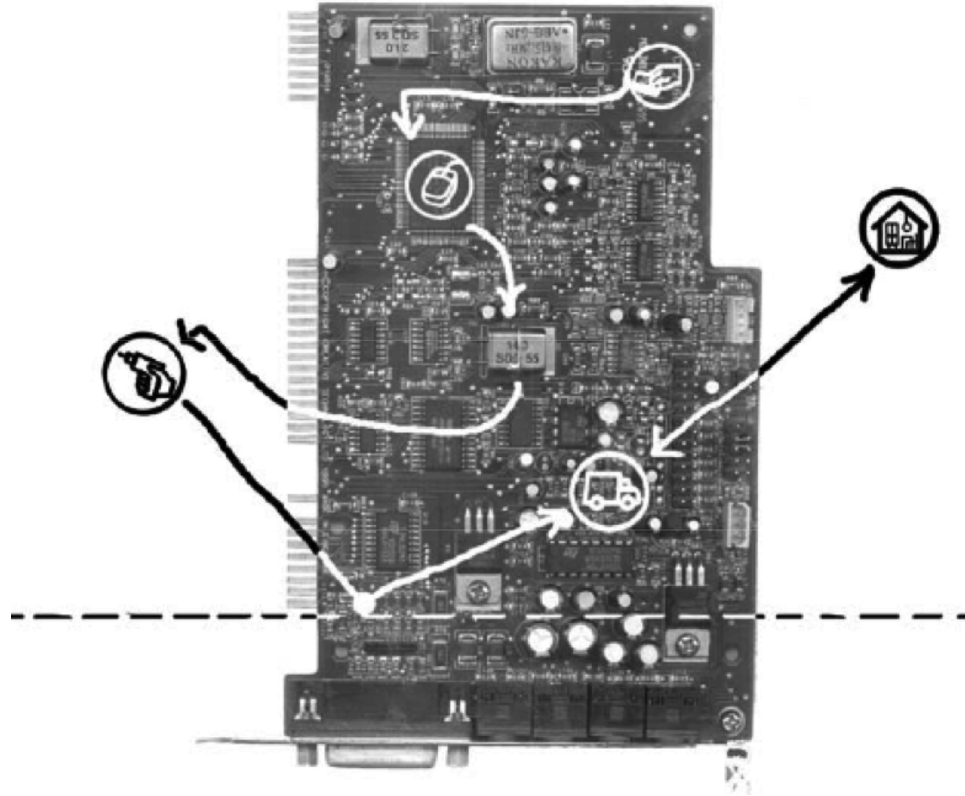


Figure 5. Graphic of an urban itinerary conducted by a Precarias a la Deriva research project signaling different points of drift in an urban setting, represented by a microchip. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND).

to be part of the generalized and explicit discontent against unsecure labor conditions, but the traditional tactic of the strike assumed an ideal type of worker that was far away from the figure of the *precaria*. Striking in the context of a per-hour contract, domestic task, or self-employed job would not have any of the expected effects. Nobody would even realize it. With this frustration as their point of departure, they started to brainstorm new ways of political intervention adapted to their circumstances. The discussion ended up with a methodological proposal: the *piquete-encuesta*, which could be translated as the picket survey. During the day of the national strike, this survey conducted by precarias stopped the productive and reproductive chain for some time and, more importantly, offered a temporary opportunity to talk and listen to an invisible population. The exchange resulting from that day was long-lasting: it opened a space for nonmediated encounters between unconnected women with singular existences who at the same time were sharing similar constraints (Precarias a la Deriva 2004:21, 22). On the basis of the excitement about the results of this initial engagement, a plan for reconnecting and exploring the diversity of the experiences of the *precariedad* in a more systematic way started to take shape. Next, Precarias a la Deriva needed research methodologies that would fit their circumstances. Looking for a procedure that would be able to capture their mobile, open-

ended, and contingent everyday lives, they found inspiration in the situationists. The original situationist technique of “derive” or “drifting” consists in linking different sites through unexpected urban itineraries, developing subjective cartographies of the city. This technique seemed to be a pertinent option enabling the interweaving of settings that precarias inhabit but that are not necessarily perceived as connected (settings such as streets, homes, offices, transportation, supermarkets, bars, union locals, etc.). *La deriva* presented itself as a perfect technique attentive to the spatial-temporal continuum that they were experiencing as precarias. Yet they were not completely satisfied with the situationist version and thus developed a feminist version of drifting, a kind of “*deriva à la femme*.” The precarias’ version of drifting consists of a situated, directed, and intentional trajectory through everyday life settings (Precarias a la Deriva 2004:26). One of its participants described some of the original thinking as they embarked on “feminist drifting” as a methodology:

As a part-time postal worker under a temporary contract with some free hours to do some paid translation, I feel like a part of the twenty-first-century assembly line: on the one hand, the mechanical aspect of filing mail and on the other hand, the creative labor involved in translating; at the same time my factory is not an isolated and enclosed building but the whole city, in the open air. . . . A lot of isolation and lack of

solidarity among us. . . . It was time to convert that alienation into analysis and research, starting to pay attention, to take notes describing everyday routines and what kind of encounters happen at 5 a.m. in the metro . . . writing in the commuting train everything I experienced allowed to not entirely normalize those realities . . . it was time to start posing and sharing hypotheses. (interview with a participant of Precarias a la Deriva, October 12, 2007)

This brief testimony shows how she experienced the act of transforming alienation and isolation at the workplace into analysis and research. In fact, several of the participants of Precarias a la Deriva were themselves unemployed PhDs or university adjuncts, balancing low salaries with translations or temporary arrangements in restaurants, postal work, and phone companies, among others. This speaks to the reading of precarity focused on paradigmatic transformations under cognitive capitalism, analyzing and counteracting the rise of communicative, affective, and immaterial traits in the sphere of labor.

#### *The Autonomous Reading of Precarity*

From the perspective of production, precarity movements signaled how labor practices were undergoing paradigmatic transformations, not solely quantitative changes such as lower salary or fewer labor rights. Indeed, the qualitative shift from Fordism and its factory models to post-Fordism and the explosion of creative industries led to expressions of unrest among the knowledge-based sectors of the economy, with statements such as “The cognitariat rises across Neuropa!” (Laser Posse Sapienza Pirata 2006). In particular, a series of collectives and networks have questioned and confronted current logics underpinning university and research production, as follows: Sauvons la Recherche in France, Ricercatori Precari in Italy, Red de Investigadores Temporales in Spain, and internationally, the network of Edu-factory.<sup>8</sup> The critiques developed in these struggles have found inspiration in the notion of “immaterial labor,” which refers to the increased use of cognitive, communicative, and affective skills in the mode of production (see Corsani and Lazzarato 2002; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Lazzarato 2006; Virno 1996, 2003). The interpretation that there has been a generalized move away from industrial labor comes from a situated reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse* fragment on machines—specifically his statement that “abstract knowledge . . . tends to become the main productive force” (Virno 2003:78; my translation). Marx’s text is read in the light of and from within the experience of the Italian ’68 movement—10 consecutive years of constant social unrest also named the “permanent ’68,” “laboratory Italy,” and the “Italian anomaly” that were characterized by a

massive exodus from factory work and a demand for nonwaged production, creativity, and affect.

Importantly, the notion of precarity under cognitive capitalism mobilized initially by youth activist networks in Europe is greatly influenced by the political current of Autonomia. Also known as workerism (*operaismo* in Italian), this refers to a practical and theoretical tradition born out of the experience of the ’68 movements in Italy. The political upheaval of 1968 had a longer time frame in Italy, starting in the late 1960s and extending to the late 1970s. The intellectual body of the Italian long ’68 advances the counterintuitive thesis that workers’ struggles, instead of responding to capitalist developments, indeed come first. Eventually, the desires and demands of those employed are appropriated and readapted for the system to keep functioning. This centrality of the workers’ agency explains the name of “workerist theory.” Besides the claims for liberation typical of the ’68 culture, which brought environmental, gender, and authoritarian issues to the front, movements in Italy were also raising the question of liberation from the discipline of the factory and nine-to-five office jobs. This was a historical moment of political intensity full of sudden government changes when nonparliamentary movements were exploring new concepts (e.g., refusal of work) and practices (e.g., militant research). These clashed with the conventional political culture at the time: on the one hand, suffering from heavy repression on the part of the “right” and, on the other hand, heavy repudiation on the part of the institutional “left” (Virno and Hardt 2010). While autonomous writings have mostly remained among academic circles in the United States, they had a different journey in Europe. Through concepts such as post-Fordism, “biocapitalism,” and immaterial labor, the autonomous interpretation advances a qualitative transformation of labor and class composition beyond decreasing labor stability and an increasing lack of benefits. Instead, autonomous analyses advance the emergence of a different system of production and value and, respectively, the opening of possibilities for unique kinds of political organizing. Autonomia-inspired activists reject the traditional leftist focus on political party and union structures as well as its obsession with reaching power. Rather, it maintains antiauthoritarian logics of organizing outside hierarchical structures and beyond representative democracies. It was in this political milieu, from the voices of students at the University of Rome in the late 1970s who were deeply antagonistic to both the Communist Party and capitalist ideologies, that precarity—as an ambivalent process affecting people across the spectrum—was first heard in this affirmation: “We are all precarious!” (Berardi Bifo 2010:22).

Thousands of participants active in laboratory Italy during the 1960s and 1970s—including prolific writers such as Tronti, Negri, Virno, Della Costa, and Berardi Bifo—had to go into exile at that time or were arrested and remained in jail for years.<sup>9</sup>

8. For a theoretical debate among these experiences, see the book edited by Edu-factory Collective (2009), *Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory*.

9. In 1977 the number of militants in jail was so high that a group of French intellectuals including Guattari, Deleuze, Barthes, Sartre, Sollers, and Kristeva launched a manifesto against repression in Italy (Berardi Bifo 2010:17).



Still, their writings and personas, as well as a new cohort of autonomous writers who grew up learning from those operaist conceptual tools forged in previous years and who also brought in other critical fields, such as postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and so on—Berardi Bifo, Mezzadra, Cristina Morini, Andrea Fumagalli, Christian Marazzi, Silvia Federici—have gained visibility in political debates, both inside and outside the academy. According to Mezzadra, precarity started to take theoretical and political centrality in Italy in the early 1980s:

While the traditional left was already taking a merely defensive and reactive position to the great transformation of capitalism that was taking place, we “reactivated” the emphasis on the subjectivity of living labor in order to foster a mapping of emerging lines of conflict and antagonism. . . . We insisted that *precarity* was definitely the outcome of capitalist strategies, but that these strategies were to be understood as a reply to practices and struggles of mobility developed by workers against factory discipline. (Cobarrubias, Casas-Cortés, and Pickles 2011:585)

A renaissance of autonomy-inspired writing spread beyond Italy in the 1990s through underground publications in France, Spain, Germany, Greece, and Argentina.

#### *Precarity Activists as “Writing Machines”*

This proliferation of autonomous writings—building on and at times contesting each other—has been part and parcel of precarity movements, gaining inspiration from and further inspiring precarity movements and back again.<sup>10</sup> Describing a major qualitative transformation underway in the sphere of labor and life, these depictions were published and translated in a series of independent venues, publications produced within activist networks, often open access and self-financed. In southern Europe, the debates about autonomy have largely remained at this level of independent publishers and underground venues. This is the case of journals that were intentionally not indexed, rejecting impact factors as contributing to the controversial political economy of intellectual production and choosing to publish writings in their national languages despite the English-dominant geopolitics of expertise. Some of these journals include *Multitudes* in France, *Posse* in Italy, and *Contrapoder* in Spain. Precarity was also the main focus of the attention of a peculiar intellectual effort called *Transversal*, an

online journal based out of the independent European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies in Vienna, Austria. Many precarity activist groups and authors published their reflections on precarity politics there; these included popular pieces in activist circles such as “Precari-Us?” in 2005,<sup>11</sup> “Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Embodied Capitalism” in 2006,<sup>12</sup> “The Monster Precariat” in 2007,<sup>13</sup> and “Experiences of Political Enunciation and Organisation in Times of Precarity” in 2008.<sup>14</sup> These were quickly translated and published in at least three languages, contributing to the dissemination of autonomous logics in the creative industries and promigration organizing and politicization among those in the research and higher-education sectors.<sup>15</sup> Also, underground magazines such as *Mute Magazine* in 2004 and 2005, *Green Pepper Magazine* in 2004, and *RePublicart* in 2005 dedicated entire issues to the topic of precarity.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, DVDs on precarity compiled videos by several precarity activist initiatives from different places, including McStrike, Intermittents du Spectacle, Yomango, Contrato Basura, Chainworkers, Precarias a la Deriva, and so on.<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously, precarity became the center of attention of a flurry of independent publishers, bookstores, and foundations, as well as self-run unofficial universities dedicated to the production of autonomous knowledges. Finally, precarity imbued with this activist thinking has progressively become an object of scholarly reflection in venues that have pioneered open-access practices in academic publications, such as *Fibreculture Journal* (Open Humanities Press), which dedicated a special issue to precarity (Neilson and Rossiter 2005).<sup>18</sup>

For this resurgence of autonomous writings, referred to at times as “post-Autonomia” (de Bloois et al. 2014), the question of precarity continues to bear a radical ambivalence. As such, for precarity activists within autonomous organizing efforts,

11. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/mitropoulos/en>.

12. <http://transversal.at/transversal/1106/tsianos-papadopoulos/en>.

13. <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/02/raunig-strands02en.html>.

14. <http://transversal.at/transversal/0508/toret-lopez-martinez/en>.

15. Precarity activist-scholars such as Angela Mitropoulos, Vassilis Tsianos, and Dimitris Papadopoulos, as well as Gerald Raunig, Alex Foti, Silvia Lopez, and Marta Malo, launched many of their works through this platform.

16. *Mute Magazine* collected the contributions of those issues in a *Precarious Reader* published in 2005, available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/magazine/mute-vol-2-no.-0-%E2%88%92-precarious-reader>. *Greenpepper Magazine* is no longer available online. Finally, the entire issue on the concept of the precariat that appeared in 2005 in *RePublicart* is still available at <http://www.republicart.net/disc/precariat/index.htm>.

17. The DVD *Precarity* is the third episode of the DVD zine P2P Fightsharing. Made by independent video makers, media activists, and translators, all videos are translated into English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Dutch, and the subtitles can be reached through a language option on the DVD menu (<https://transversal.at/transversal/0704/p2p/en>).

18. Also, a few scholarly articles and edited collections are starting to recall the practices, actions, and theoretical legacies of those precarity movements based in southern Europe (Armano, Bove, and Murgia 2017; Fernandez de Rota 2011; Shukaitis 2013).

10. The explicit engagement by activist initiatives with research practices of analysis, writing, and publishing makes precarity movements exemplary of the complex objects that George Marcus proposes as the focus for the anthropology of complexity. Although social movements were not in Marcus's initial list of instances of complex systems, I propose considering movements as such. In particular, the image of “writing machines” (Marcus 1999) fits well with the prolific precarity movements. Marcus (1999) advocates for a mode of engagement aware of the complexity and possible affinities with these new objects, “producers of powerful and sometimes authoritative representations” (24–25).

the spreading of precarious conditions in the sphere of production represents an opening for rethinking political possibilities. The next section goes beyond changing labor conditions to consider precarity as a form of existential vulnerability. Would this existential take on precarity still be traversed by ambivalence and possibility, or is it largely a cause for despair?

### Precarity as Existential Vulnerability

Precarias a la Deriva defines precarity as a condition that cannot be reduced to only oppressive labor conditions. This is how they self-identify, emphasizing the ambivalent existential character:

We are *precarious women*. This means some positive things (such as the accumulation of knowledge, expertise and skills through our work and existential experiences which are under permanent construction); a lot of negative things (such as vulnerability, insecurity, poverty, social instability); and the majority being ambivalent things (such as mobility, flexibility). (Precarias a la Deriva 2004:17; my translation).

Philosophical engagement has proved to be a crucial contribution to the debate on precarity, broadening its understanding beyond labor and the workplace. Judith Butler might be the most influential English-language reference within this trend. Reflecting on the consequences of the US war on terror after September 11, Butler (2006) speaks of “precarious life,” eloquently pointing to current existential conditions of suffering that lead to identity reformulations in the context of the severe deterioration of everyday lives. This philosophical appraisal of contemporary precarious existence is addressed later in scenarios of further violence, torture, and survival, in “frames of war” where life itself is at stake (Butler 2009). Precarity then becomes “the *politically induced condition* in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks . . . becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009:25; emphasis added).

According to Precarias a la Deriva, paralleling Butler’s work, it is life itself—understood in broader philosophical, existential, and phenomenological terms—that is being paradigmatically transformed. This is what they name the “precarization of existence” (Precarias a la Deriva 2004). While precarity is reframed as an existential condition of vulnerability, Butler’s accounts seem to restrict precarity to more extreme cases, as if precarity solely affects those who are at the end of the spectrum in terms of exclusion and suffering. Precarias a la Deriva, though, insists on speaking in terms of precarization to emphasize the overarching process touching many lives at different levels. This approach stresses how precarity unfolds as a process; it is not a particular state of affairs, neither a sociological category with a fixed identity nor an extreme case of suffering: “Notwithstanding, in the present context it is not possible to speak of precarity as a differentiated state and, as such, to distinguish neatly between a precarious population and another guaranteed one. Rather it is more fitting to detect a tendency towards the *precarization of life* that threatens so-

ciety as a whole” (Precarias a la Deriva 2004:27; my translation). Using a similar notion of the exacerbated fragility of life itself, several ethnographic engagements focus on how distinct cultures of vulnerability unfold in contemporary versions of capitalism. In fact, some authors of cultural anthropology and political philosophy also posit precarity as a process generalizing certain existential conditions. Anthropologist Anna Tsing interweaves theoretical and empirical work to depict precarity as the condition of life within the ruins of “salvage capitalism” through the ethnographic study of the practices of production and trade networks of matsutake mushrooms. In the introduction, she defines precarity as “life without the promise of stability” (Tsing 2015:2). Anna Tsing introduces precariousness as an analytical prism through which to understand global capitalism, broadening the sense of vulnerability across national limits and geographical imaginaries, touching on everyone: “Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious—even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined. . . . Now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end” (2).

As Tsing contends in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, to get a sense of precarity—to survive it and to think through it—it is necessary to see life in different terms, to understand the ways it breaks down but also grows anew amid the blasted ruins of capitalism (17–25). In fact, Tsing’s account does contain certain doses of hope. This story of collaborative survival stands out from most critical literature that engages millennial capitalism as producing precarious conditions to the point of negating hope and desire.<sup>19</sup> Still, this interest in the existential depiction of precarity has inspired other anthropologists. In fact, the journal *Cultural Anthropology* dedicated a curated collection to precarity; Shaw and Byler compiled a series of selected works on experiences of precarity in distinct geographies and cultural scenarios, spanning from kidnapping in postinvasion Iraq (Al-Mohammad 2012) to care arrangements under the credit economy in Chile (Han 2011) to the unemployed and homeless in Romania “waiting to die” (O’Neill 2014) to recyclers in the dumps of Brazil (Millar 2014) to animal suffering (Dave 2014) and to more methodological reflections over different instances of precariousness (Stewart 2012). All of them show an exquisite ethnographic attention to fragility, suffering, and survival amid work, exhaustion, the passing of time, and even death. In fact, interviews with the authors discuss the ethnographic method as one that is able to capture precariousness beyond a homogeneous social class and as a more ontological condition of fragility marked by the singularities of each experience, usually found in unexpected scenarios: “The building up of long relationships provides anthropologists with insight into the changing structural conditions that make living life increasingly difficult, but also reveals the complicated ways in which precarious social conditions fold inward, become

19. For works addressing the emergence of precarity as an affective condition, see Berlant (2011) and Ahmed (2010).



embodied, and change the way people interpret everyday life” (interview with Bruce O’Neill by Shaw and Byler 2016). Precarity in these ethnographic works is not closed to the cultures of the work space and labor in the strict sense of production: “Once you expand the notion of labor to include the labor of life and living, then we all inhabit precariousness in a mundane sense” (interview with Hayder Al-Mohammed by Shaw and Byler 2016). This thick appraisal of precarity appears through the ethnographic accounts, leading to an implicit and sometimes explicit critique of Guy Standing’s work: “The *precariat* is often conceived as a redundant population or a surplus humanity. . . . [As such], it carries pejorative and apocalyptic undertones, homogenizes a diverse set of worker experiences, and revives dualist paradigms. Precarity (unlike the *precariat*) is not a category but a relationship” (interview with Kathleen Millar in Shaw and Byler 2016).

Through these ethnographic works, the editors note how precarity is thus fundamentally concerned with politics as being produced by institutions and systems of exploitation and racism, further building on Butler’s (2009) notion of precarity as “a politically induced condition” (25). Still, the political under this prism seems to narrow the door to possibilities for collective reconfigurations. Instead, possible responses are framed on an individual basis and introduced in terms of apathy, assistance from privileged positions, or acts of survival.

An entire ethnographic monograph on precarity captures the changing survival practices within despair, as well as current glimpses of hope in Japan, where many have self-identified as being in the midst of trouble. *Precarious Japan* points to how the environmental aftermaths of the nuclear disaster are layered with a model of increasing temporary contracts that is moving away from the stable and well-founded modes of employment springing from the Japanese economic miracle. This is a thorough appraisal of simultaneous processes that are making many in Japan live precariously behind facades of well-being (Allison 2013). Still, there are ways for people to reinvent notions of home, family, and quality of life as they are coping with increasing insecurity. *Current Anthropology* also dedicated a special issue to long-term ethnographic accounts of poor communities experiencing precarity beyond “material scarcity” (Das and Randeria 2015). The articles focus on how the urban poor from four regions—Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East—become political actors in conditions of precarity. In this issue, the meaning of precarity is not the object of attention; rather, the focus is on the politics of survival emerging out of diverse experiences of precarity, delivering rich accounts of what kinds of collective action unfold from conditions of vulnerability and volatility among the urban poor in Jakarta (Simone 2015), revolutionaries during the Arab Spring in Cairo (Bayat 2015), and the “wrong kind of migrants” in Cape Town (Williams 2015). Another section of the issue includes papers that engage with expressions of politics that “do not take the presence of the state for granted” in scenarios such as postinvasion Iraq, postapartheid South Africa, and occupied Palestine (Das and Randeria 2015:8).

Still, despite its thicker treatment in terms of understanding precarity as something that escapes the confines of the work space, the way precarity is framed in many of these ethnographies is case specific, especially affecting groups under processes of exclusion (e.g., the unemployed, kidnapped families, the “urban poor”) or within a national framework (e.g., Japan), somehow restricting the applicability of the concept to certain kinds of populations and to particular countries. Moreover, by focusing on the miseries brought by radical vulnerability,<sup>20</sup> most of these ethnographies are missing a crucial point raised by Precarias a la Deriva and other precarity activists: the unbound ambivalence within the concept.

This ambivalence leads again to a political opening. The interpretations and ethnographies discussed above look into the despair of vulnerability and strategies of “coping” rather than “opening.” If these ethnographies focus on how to face situations of extreme precarity by taking care of oneself and one’s community, it is precisely in those practices of survival and mutual support that Precarias a la Deriva sees a potential opening. Precarias a la Deriva has begun to develop a vocabulary and series of experiments to think of occupying the spaces of care as sites of struggle from which to politicize the practices of care. In fact, since 2006, the emphasis of Precarias a la Deriva’s work has become the notion of care struggles. While these efforts are incipient, they reframe care not just as a desperate means to fill the gap in the midst of abandonment by institutions. Eventually, for these feminist groups, care becomes a site from which to organize new networks and even new political demands such as “care strikes” and “care-tizenship.”<sup>21</sup> The next section shows how this ambivalence and political opening are embraced even among those sectors in precarity struggles focused on one of the most vulnerable experiences, lifelong migration.

## Precarity as Permanent Mobility

Most of the literature working on the precarious conditions of specific migrant populations reveals unique experiences of vulnerability in cases of displacement and exclusion (e.g., Schierup et al. 2015).<sup>22</sup> These analyses intersecting between

20. Nonetheless, there are anthropologists working on radical vulnerability (framed as “crisis” instead of precarity) conducting ethnographic studies of ordinary people’s vulnerable conditions as conducive for alternative practices of value and reconfigurations of hope (Narotzky and Besnier 2014).

21. In fact, care-centered politics became a central demand of feminist organizers in Spain calling for national and international “feminist strikes” on March 8, 2018. I discuss in further detail the notion of “care-tizenship” in a 2019 article in *Citizenship Studies*.

22. These studies usually come from the first reviewed strand of labor studies, this time focusing on migrant communities in their studies of precarious conditions at the workplace. Engaging this growing literature is out of the scope of this paper; nonetheless, it is important to mention it for the sake of my argument aimed at pointing out how precarity activists are advancing a distinct view of precarity, even when it is linked to the question of migration.

precarity and migration provide detailed and insightful depictions of how migration policy and restrictions to citizenship further fragment the labor force and lessen access to certain services and entitlements, leading to situations of exclusion (Martinez Veiga 2011). Still, according to precarity activists, these analyses leave promigration initiatives politically trapped as to possible collective organizing projects.

The view of precarity as mainly the peril of a clear-cut population contrasts with the understanding of mobility as an ambivalent condition that is considered to be spreading among sectors. This activist understanding interrogates current narrow uses of the migrant label and provides openings for collective agency and political organizing. According to precarity movements, flexible work arrangements and the lack of guaranteed services enhance overall existential uncertainty. But these arrangements also bring about a series of unexpected circumstances that might provide opportunities. A large sector of precarity activists emphasizes the emerging prominence of everlasting mobility, though taken as a source of ambiguous prospects. The urge to always be open to changing jobs or moving to other places, nearby or across continents, brings along both positive and negative experiences. Without equating subject positions and experiences and fiercely opposed to current border policies, the activist understanding of precarity somehow allows for the drawing of connections between apparently distant situations—for example, between forced displacements leading to undocumented migration and the itineraries taken by precarious academics.

This understanding comes directly from adopting migration as the point of view to analyze and cope with larger transformations afoot. This is one of the main theses of the political-intellectual trend known as “autonomy of migration,” which calls for embracing “borders as method,” that is, engaging mobility as the primary analytical and organizational framework (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Autonomy of migration directly builds on the autonomy tradition and its argument for the “primacy of resistance,” that is, how collective agency “comes first.” Building on poststructuralist notions of power, resistance is ontologically prior in terms of its constituent role in the re/configuration of structures. As such, anthropologist Nicholas De Genova defines this autonomist view of migration succinctly in his introduction to *The Borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering*:

Border patrols and the diverse efforts of state powers aimed at border control have everywhere arisen as reaction formations. They are responses to a prior fact—the mass mobility of human beings on the move, the manifest expression of the freedom of movement of the human species, on a global scale. Consequently, the heterogeneous tactics of bordering respond to all the unpredictable and intractable dimensions of the elementary subjectivity and autonomy of migration. (De Genova 2017:5–6)

For more than a decade, this “autonomous gaze” (Mezzadra 2011) has been fueling promigration activist initiatives struggling creatively against current border policies under the call

for freedom of movement for all. This is the case of Frassanito Network, a pan-European association of local groups across southern and central Europe that eloquently captures the re-invigorating meaning of precarity under this prism:

In recent years, the transformations of citizenship and precarization of labour constituted two strategic fields around which the left and the social movements in Europe organized their struggle against “neoliberalism.” In both of these fields, the movements and struggles of migration provide a crucial input in disentangling the radical political imagination from the impossible dream of a return to an alleged “golden age” of social state citizenship and of the “fordist” compromise between labour and capital. At a first glance, migrants’ condition (social and political stratification, frontiers within citizenship and precarization of labour) reveal the brutality of the transformations that have reshaped citizenship and labour relations in the last two decades. They revealed and attacked the nightmare of factory discipline and social domination hidden beneath the rhetorical dream of the “integration” of the other. (Frassanito Network 2006)

Migration then gains a prominent explanatory and propositional role, to the point of approaching a social movement itself. However, it is important to note that claiming the centrality of migration does not imply privileging the figure of the migrant as the new political or revolutionary subject. Rather, it is claimed as a point of view that changes the perspective when looking not only at migration but also at other issues:

To assume migration as a point of view means to take distance from any political discourse on migration informed by paternalism and pietism. Migration, as we see it, needs to be considered as a social movement and we need to take into account the social protagonism of migration. . . . These struggles and the potential they carry should not be simply considered in terms of a “special issue” on migration since what they show us exceeds the boundaries of any such narrow classification. (Frassanito Network 2006)

This reframing made migration and migrants themselves a centerpiece for understanding overall precarity struggles. Local youth and recently arrived populations from outside the European Union found many parallels in common: unemployment, chains of short-term contracts, lack of access to housing, the need to migrate, and so on. In writing, this was captured with the expression “We are all migrants!” or, in more Deleuzian terms (a favorite among autonomous activists), “This is the becoming-migrant of labor.” Migrant work is not just similar to some of the current forms of precarious labor. Some defend that it is actually becoming the paradigm to define contemporary practices of production:

When we talk about the paradigmatic character of migrant labour, rather we want [to] stress the fact that migrants are experiencing in advance the general conditions of contemporary labour, with all the forms of depreciation and precarization. At the same time we want to point out that

migrants' practices of mobility express a radical challenge to these processes of deprivation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite clear differences and hierarchies, a growing awareness of potential migranthood leads to a sense of shared perspective among very different singularities. This emerging realization of commonality amid fragmentation, a kind of conflicted yet collective identity, eventually becomes something to be proud of and open about. This is what I frame as precarity pride.

### *Precarity Pride Parades*

By the early 2000s, after years of incubating practices behind public view and beyond state-based politics, there were a series of pan-European calls for people affected by precarity to take the streets and celebrate their underrecognized condition as precariat openly (see fig. 6). The goal was to go beyond denunciation and critique. Rather, the intent was to come out of the closet as the precarious generation, fully embracing the possibilities of this ambivalent emergent condition of unpredictability, and to start bridging alliances between disparate and dispersed sectors. These precarity pride parades took place on May 1 annually for around five years, depending on the city, often coinciding with MayDay celebrations. MayDay is traditionally known as International Workers' Day and is a holiday in many countries around the world. The date of May 1 was chosen in remembrance of the Haymarket Affair in Chicago, when industrial workers organizing for the eight-hour day campaign were violently repressed with police brutality in May 1886 (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Workers%27\\_Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Workers%27_Day)). EuroMayDay has been promoted as an attempt to "update" the traditional International Workers' Day celebrated on May 1. EuroMayDay needed to go beyond the trade unions' constituency by focusing on flexible employees with short-term contracts, migrants, and other atypical workers living in Europe. In 2005, the EuroMayDay network used the following satirical slogan, with resonances to traditional leftist discourse: "Precarious people of the world, let's unite and strike 4 a free, open, radical Europe."<sup>24</sup>

Waiters, graphic designers, construction workers, retired grandmas, undocumented tomato pickers, and non-tenure track faculty found common cause and joined in a series of street parties, often wildcat style for surprise effect. As a kind of precarity pride parade, these EuroMayDay celebrations went viral and started to be celebrated simultaneously across many European cities. These theatrical and music rave takeovers of the streets took place every May 1 for several years. They represent this ambivalent, almost naively positive take on precarity in lively

colors as well as the happy portraits of characters found on promotional posters. As if there were an intentional investment in nurturing doses of hope and pride in the midst of generalized pessimism brought on by a context of austerity policies, unemployment, restrictive migratory laws, the lack of prospects to accessible housing to form a family or community, to engage in a political project:

For several years now, some of us, and as time passes, more and more of us, have been talking about "precarity" as a common name that touches all those supposedly "atypical" realities of labor and life—although we know they are currently the majority. We've been thinking about how we are all affected (though to different degrees) by the fact that productivity continues to be understood as profit-making, and not as achieving more livable lives. We've been experimenting with ways of organizing ourselves to respond to situations of injustice and exploitation from spaces of encounter that are no longer located at the workplaces. We've been asking what might be to "think in common" when the forms taken by the neoliberal economy and its new border regimes push us to isolate ourselves and look for individual ways of survival. (Precarias a la Deriva LISTSERV, May 2007)

This was a portion of a longer and passionate call for MayDay Madrid 2008 that advanced how precarity brings a profound awareness of shared vulnerability—including experiences of production, reproduction, and mobility. Those experiences are in turn deeply ambivalent, leading to a reinvigorated politicization of precarity itself and a desire to "think in common" in the midst of fragmentation.

### *Precarity as a Site of the Political: From MayDay Parades to a Precarious Lexicon*

Such critical and intersectional awareness of precarity enables us to embrace its intrinsic ambivalence, developed into expressions of individual and collective agency. Still, for precarity movements, the political is not understood as participation in electoral representative democracies but as a broader field of antagonism and collective recomposition:

In the current historical moment, if we take the political to be that wider field of contingency and struggle that exceeds established regimes of "politics," the political seems to be more tangible than ever. With the neoliberal narrowing and flattening of "politics," there is a proliferation of manifestations of a desire for the political that repudiates "politics" as such. (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018:3)

Precarity as a source of this "desire for the political" is addressed in different disciplinary fields, mainly feminist political theory, performance studies, and art theory. Despite the overall disconnection between academic and activist literatures on precarity signaled by Neilson and Rossiter (2008),<sup>25</sup> I present

23. This statement appears in a broadside titled "EuroMayDay and Freedom of Movement" that was developed by the Frassanito Network and distributed during the celebration of EuroMayDay in 2005. For a similar argument available online, see "Not Simply a Job. Does Migrant Labor Make Political Sense?" in the *Movements of Migration* newsletter of the Frassanito Network ([http://www.noborder.org/files/movements\\_of\\_migration.pdf](http://www.noborder.org/files/movements_of_migration.pdf); accessed September 2, 2021).

24. This slogan was used on the banners during the EuroMayDay street celebrations of 2005. It is also quoted in Näsström and Kalm (2015).

25. Their piece reflects on "the shift from precarity as a political technology of movements to precarity as an object of academic study" (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:51).



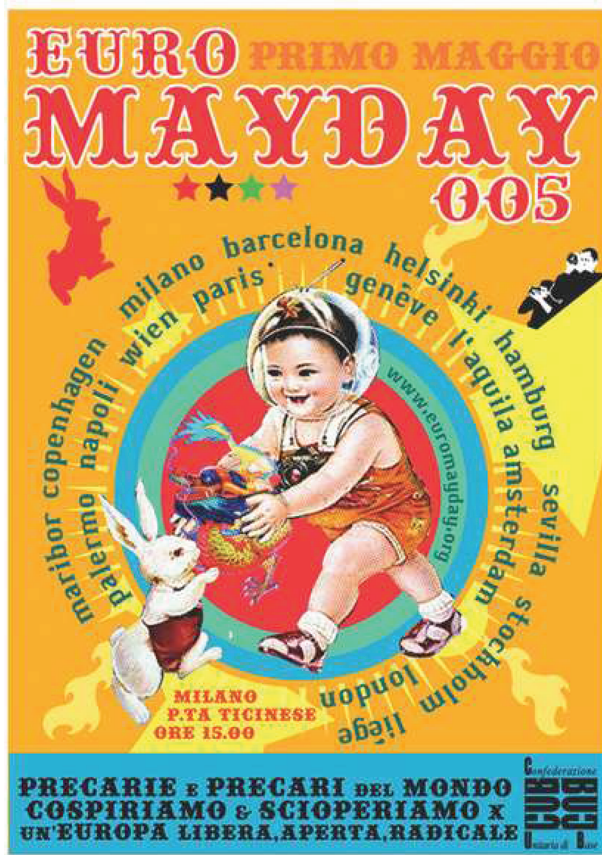


Figure 6. EuroMayDay poster by EuroMayDay Network, 2005. Creative Commons Public Domain (CCO).

below a few important scholarly engagements deeply inspired by and reflecting on concrete social movements that explicitly or implicitly politicize experiences of precarity.

One of Butler's students, Isabell Lorey (2015), wrote *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* as a philosophical argument about precarization as a new stage of power that traverses or runs through life, leading to subjected modes of existence. Rather than presenting a paternalistic analysis of domination, Lorey sees precarization not only as a threat but also as a subversive form of radical politics that could serve as a platform for resistance. Interestingly, this would be the philosophical translation of the arguments made by recent social movements: precarity as an ambivalent condition that can bring on multiple levels of insecurity but can also serve to reinvent isolated identities, becoming a tool for new collective senses of belonging and subversion. In the same vein, the collaborative book between Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) directly refers to and reflects on contemporary movements.<sup>26</sup> This theoretical engagement with collective action

identifies a common thread in a variety of current social movements (e.g., Indigenous claims, landless peasants, undocumented migrants, the unemployed, nontenured academics, and Occupy participants) as sharing the same precarious starting point: a dual form of dispossession as a way of life experienced by those who, according to the neoliberal rationality of narrow notions of value, have been normalized as disposable. Dual dispossession refers on the one hand to material forms of removal (e.g., of labor, land, movement) and on the other hand to embodied forms of withdrawal of the self. That is, under liberalism and neoliberalism, the self is confiscated from the inner sense of utter dependency on others. When a nonliberal realization of the self as made out of many others and being deeply dependent comes through, there is a possibility for a reconfigured sense of contingency and interconnection. According to the authors, this realization will lead to forms of agency beyond liberal notions of freedom and politics. Such dual dispossession translates itself into a disposition that they call "performative politics" based on collective attempts to both address bodily needs and coinhabit fluid yet supportive alliances. This brilliant theorization comes from a careful observation of the highly conceptual discourses and politics advanced by autonomous movements organizing outside institutional frameworks.

Furthermore, a similar theoretical engagement with precarity as a site of politics engaging social movements themselves emerges in a series of books framed within Deleuzian thought (Raunig 2010; Raunig, Derieg, and Negri 2013; Raunig, Ray, and Wuggenig 2011). These works constitute a kind of social movement-based theoretical elaboration of precarity. On the basis of accounts of activities by concrete collectives, they capture the complexity and significance of struggles around precarity in their own right. Also, they point out how precarity movements provide empowering possibilities to reimagine collective action, problematizing the overwhelming negative connotations given to precarity by critical sociology as well as literature inspired by *Precarious Life*. These works show a rich and at times contradictory take on precarity and a much-needed refreshing understanding of current social movements as elaborators of politics outside modern paradigms.

A complementary set of works speaks about contemporary movements working outside liberal politics as usual, especially against and beyond representative democracy (Gardner 2015). This complementary literature explicitly engaging precarity is drawn primarily from the fields of visual arts and performance studies. The journal *TDR: The Drama Review* launched a special issue on precarity in 2012 that compiled an excellent collection grounded in a rich trajectory of socially engaged art, the precarious conditions of artists, and performance (Ridout and Schneider 2012). This literature recognizes the influence of the Italian autonomous tradition and precarity movements in Europe in placing the artist, the performer, as a center to understand current political and economic transformations (Jackson 2012). For instance, this set of works speaks to how artists, within their art productions and actions, are conceptualizing the novel conditions of a post-Fordist, postindustrialized economy

26. The piece by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou reflects on "the shift from precarity as a political technology of the movements to precarity as an object of academic study" (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:51).

as well as a flexible and interconnected landscape with political potential (Aranda and Berardi Bifo 2011).

This intersection of precarity and social justice initiatives is also present in Neilson and Rossiter's (2008) essay on "Precarity as a Political Concept." They point to several examples of activist journals in which the notion of the precariat was disseminated along European networks well in advance of Standing's publications. I agree with these authors in that the debates sparked by the European precarity movements are important to remember not only because they predated growing scholarly interest but also because they had rich potential for reimagining political articulation. According to Neilson and Rossiter, the political potential of precarity resides in avoiding universalizing, all-encompassing, and unifying tendencies since that would mean an overwhelming burden for disparate movements. Rather, acknowledging the multiplicity of precarity would lead to "practices of translation, putting differences into relation" (60) without flattening them, able to articulate alternative subjectivities and create new institutional forms, each one on its own terms: "Our argument is that precarity is an ontological experience and social-economic condition with multiple registers that hold the potential to contribute to the political composition of the common" (55).

In fact, I would say that these authors, themselves participants in the activist networks they describe, are indeed introducing and reflecting on the very understanding of precarity mobilized among precarity movements in western Europe, emphasizing its multi-layered and processual character as well as its political potential for rearticulation. Still, I find their account of the precarity movements limited both in terms of time and in terms of what counts as their political actions and contributions. Neilson and Rossiter narrowed the precarity movements to the initiative of EuroMayDay, "an annual day of action against precarity, which began in Milan in 2001 and spread to 18 European cities by 2005, entering a crisis by 2006" (53). While they acknowledge that EuroMayDay helped to put precarity on the political agenda and that struggles around precarity spread beyond a particular date of action, the authors take for granted that the European precarity movements were dead by 2006. While there has definitely been a shifting of collectives, networks, and activists, there is a legacy of these struggles that continues today. For one, this pan-European annual day of action calling precarious people to unite kept going in other EU countries, such as in Portugal in 2007 and later on in 2013. Most importantly, though, I argue that there is a linguistic and conceptual legacy of these movements that still produces resonances. The activist understanding of precarity has been carefully recorded and extensively written about in activist texts, including "Precarious Lexicon," which presents several neologisms playing on words to capture novel analyses, such as "precarization of existence," or political proposals, such as "flexsecurity" or "copy-left."<sup>27</sup> I contend that those conceptual and graphic productions conveyed a different way

to read neoliberal policies: a precarity awareness and a kind of precarity pride, which has traveled widely, resonating among those facing austerity and flexibilization policies in southern European countries and becoming a point of departure for political mobilization.<sup>28</sup> While specific activist initiatives might be defunct right now, it is remarkable the many times the term precarious and its variants have been explicitly present among current activist meetings and campaigns as well as in mainstream debates. Indeed, many authors point to how the rising awareness about precarity as a process of induced uncertainty affecting people across the spectrum in distinct ways has been key in mobilizing the wave of square occupations and expressions of indignation across the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Holmes 2012; Raunig, Derieg, and Negri 2013; Schram 2015; Shukaitis 2013; Thompson 2015).

In their explicit effort to put together a lexicon, precarity movements have advanced not only a series of tactics or a story of actions but also a conceptual legacy and nomenclature on how to understand, survive, and reverse scenarios of vulnerability and isolation. By focusing on the explicit creation of vocabulary to name changing conditions and political possibilities, precarity movements produced a living lexicon—yet to be totally compiled—to name the present and possible futures, opening imaginations and calling into being novel organizing strategies and political proposals.

### Conclusion: Precarity, an Interventionist Proposition from the Ground Up

A primary objective for this paper is to provide a much-needed correction to the current conceptualization of precarity within scholarly literature. All too often, precarity is presented as a static state of trouble or an everlasting condition of despair under uncertainty. Sociological works approach precarity strictly as a labor category referring to insecurity in the work space, heightened among undocumented migrant populations. Philosophical and anthropological approaches to precarity discuss power configurations that lead to material and existential conditions of vulnerability, which ethnographic works describe and reflect on in elaborated detail. However, many of those engagements do not acknowledge and engage the actual people and social movements that ground this concept differently. An attention to the activist politicization of the term yields a unique approach to precarity as a site of agency and identity reconfiguration. By tracing an alternative intellectual genealogy, I locate the contentious use of precarity within social movements themselves, which do not understand it as a fixed and monolithic condition—and are far from consolidating it into a social class named the precariat. Rather, precarity under an activist gaze becomes a deeply ambivalent condition and a fluid opportunity. In the words of two precarity MayDay organizers from southern Spain, "It is not a sociological category, it is a program of intervention" (Toret and Sguglia 2006). Indeed, when precarity is embraced in

27. <http://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/12/14/precarias-a-la-deriva-precious-lexicon/>.

28. For an appraisal of graphic productions by EuroMayDay precarity networks, see Doerr (2010).

its ambivalence all the way down, movements unfold a multifaceted notion of the political. Rather than falling into easy victimization, the main contribution of precarity struggles consists of enabling an alternative politics to tinker with the changing infrastructures and increasingly intertwined cultures of production, reproduction, and citizenship. This rethinking of the political advanced by precarity movements entails transformative consequences in practices and discourses. In activists' writings, meetings, and campaigns, precarity has been rendered a productive analytical tool with the potential to rearticulate personal identities and reinvigorate collective organization within uncertain livelihoods.

On the basis of a careful appraisal of political activities self-identified as precarity organizing in Europe—such as antiprivatization campaigns, new forms of biunionism, pro-affordable housing actions, demands for public expenditure in health and education, pro-freedom of movement and antiborder actions, and collective self-organization of the unemployed, freelancers, hackers, and domestic workers—I contend that these diverse sets of constituencies are reinventing and embodying precarity as a way of life able to bridge unexpected alliances. The rise of activism around precarity emerged originally in the context of the ongoing socioeconomic restructuring in the southern European Union. Connected by horizontal networks and practices of mutual aid and social media, these autonomous grassroots networks develop a fluid and empowering understanding of vulnerable conditions intensified by neoliberalism. Such activist theorization, born out of on-the-ground struggles, understands precarity both as a descriptive insight into paradigmatic shifts in society and as a rallying point for renewing subjectivities and forms of collective action. Among those organizational and analytical political propositions are the ones briefly reviewed in this paper, such as picket surveys, feminist drifts, precarity pride parades, and the overall “Precarious Lexicon,” with two revised entries, “precarization” and “the becoming-migrant of labor.”

#### *The Precarious Geopolitics of Knowledge Production on Precarity*

Despite the long and prolific trajectory of precarity organizing, there is a striking absence of the movement's writings and actions among current scholarly and activist debates in North America. Yet it is practically impossible to speak about precarity in academic productions without mentioning Standing and what feels like a term increasingly patented under his name, the precariat. The many campaigns and activist groups that mobilized around precarity long before his writings, even using the same and similar terms (e.g., precariat, cognitariat), are simply off the table.<sup>29</sup> While there might be legitimate reasons

for this slip, such as the lack of English translations of the prolific productions of these movements, I still find this uneven treatment problematic. First of all because from a complex genealogy of disparate sectors—squatters, domestic workers, hackers, adjuncts, undocumented migrants—and their grassroots theorizations on the question of precarity, the only legitimate interlocutor has become a United Kingdom-based expert, an English-speaking scholar and white male. Far from a personal attack, this is a necessary reckoning with absences and presences when it is time to speak about precarity in the Anglo-Saxon academy. My goal is to contribute to repairing this omission in search of epistemic justice, signaling how the concept of precarity results rather from a process of collective theorization. Second of all, such a geopolitics of knowledge erases grassroots conceptualizations of precarity coming from those who, while living in Europe, portray themselves as being not quite European, as rejecting its modern episteme (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018). This is deeply concerning precisely because such an erasure of precarity movements is hindering the political potential of precarity. This paper argues that the unique reading of precarity offered by movements entails a deep rethinking of the political, avoiding trust on the terrain of electoral politics and activating unexpected alliances, which in turn enable alternative practices of survival and collective agency. These organized networks are acting not only in the public performativity of the streets but also, even more so, through the explicit placement of knowledge production at the very heart of politics. This was and still is the case, as briefly introduced in this paper through numerous political essays traveling through activist-managed journals, magazines, and online archives translating those pieces into many languages; the proliferation of DIY militant research projects; and the development of knowledge distribution ventures such as bookstores and autonomous universities. In all those productions, rising conditions of vulnerability are said to contain a radical ambivalence that, in turn, opens a space for the political and the reformulation of identities.

Further compilation and exploration of such precarity movements and their prolific precarious lexicon are necessary and will benefit current debates of exclusion, inequality, and agency. When embracing a proposed “knowledge turn” in the study of collective action, precarity movements appear as prophets of the sharing and gig economies, providing pertinent insights and enabling individual and collective imaginations to go beyond the established capitalist common sense.

#### Acknowledgments

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29. For instance, see the debate on academic precarity on the *Cultural Anthropology* website, available at <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/academic-precarity-in-american-anthropology>. Despite the extensive treatment of similar topics in precarity in research sectors and higher education already worked out by activist groups in Europe, there is no reference to or acknowledgment of these previous genealogies of precarity.



been working on this piece and my book project, *Prophets of Precarity*, to be the first manuscript on precarity activism. I wish to acknowledge Arturo Escobar as the main inspiration of this paper. Previously my doctoral adviser and forever a teacher of life, he firmly supports my work on precarity and the advancement of a necessary knowledge turn in the study of collective action. I also thank Emek Ergun, Joyce Dalsheim, Liz Mason-Deese, Sugandh Gupta, Gabriela Valdivia, Sebastian Cobarrubias, and the anonymous reviewers of *Current Anthropology* for their feedback on a previous iteration of this article. Finally, my infinite gratitude to all those mobilizing against and within precarity, especially to the participants of the feminist and militant research project Precarias a la Deriva for lifelong inspiration.

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## Comments

### Alex Khasnabish

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Maribel Casas-Cortés has written a timely and insightful piece about precarity as a process, knowledge concept, and catalyst for social movement organizing. Casas-Cortés does vital work in correcting the occlusion of social movement knowledge work on this topic dating back decades, long before its trendiness in the English-speaking academy. Her emphasis on precarity as a site of possibility for radical social change movements is important, and she does excellent work illuminating many examples, particularly in the southern European context, of movements creating space for social change experiments by focusing on this. At the same time, this argument about precarity's fecundity for new politics, fresh alliances, and social reorganization has some dark corners that require exploration.

Despite claims to the contrary, the account here, as with many that focus on the novelty of precarity, foregrounds "creative," "affective," and "knowledge" work and the experiences of those who sell their labor within such sectors. That is not to say that such a focus is not relevant, only that it is partial. It is disproportionately located in advanced capitalist countries, is highly urban, tends to center those with significant social and cultural if not actual capital, and orbits around universities and arts spaces. I think that it is no accident that precarity has become a fashionable point of focus for the politically engaged academy as academic labor has become ever more precarious. But making collective social life precarious has been a part of capitalism's DNA since its beginnings; it is what provokes the process of proletarianization in the first place. The radical histories offered by scholars such as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (Linebaugh 2008; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Rediker 2004, 2007), David Roediger (2007, 2017), and Silvia Federici (2003) are powerful examples of scholarly work that shows us this.

Precarity as a state of being is also nonsensical unless the implicit frame for comparison is the brief "golden age" of capitalism and the welfare state, lasting roughly from the end of World War II until the mid-1960s. It is as if this brief period when radical and rebellious mass movements compelled capitalists to pay some workers decent wages and the state to step in and provide social welfare were the rule rather than the exception. Was life for the majority of people living under capitalism before this less precarious than today? There are lineages of radical anticapitalist and antiauthoritarian organizing that go back much further than the 1960s and that center the increasing precariousness of life under capitalism that almost never get mentioned in the academic circles where precarity has become such a fashion. The radical organizing of the Industrial Workers of the World in the early part of the twentieth century repudiated the co-opted model of craft unionism and instead sought to build an anarcho-syndicalist society through organizing with all those who were deemed undesirable by the mainstream unions (Buhle and Schulman 2005; Cole, Struthers, and Zimmer 2017; Lynd and Grubačić 2008). A focus on precarity also tends to ignore the fact that capitalism has, for centuries, approached some people, particularly Indigenous and Black people in the settler-colonial nation-states of the global North, not as proletarians in the making but as those worthy only of being criminalized, dispossessed, contained, and exterminated (Coulthard 2014; Maynard 2017).

Precarity also is not an issue that belongs only to the left, as demonstrated by the rising tide of white supremacy and protofascism across the global North. The precariousness of daily life has provided at least as much of an opening for the far right as it has for social justice movements, particularly as it nurtures and preys on a deep-seated sense of "aggrieved entitlement" among those who were promised that if they played by the rules of white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism they would be rewarded (Kimmel 2015). Like fascists in Italy and Germany in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, it is the far right that has managed to seize the opportunity offered by increasing precarity to draw people to it and to mobilize them (Hett 2018; Paxton 2004). Capitalism produces crisis in its endless search for profit, and liberalism is fundamentally incapable of addressing the deep-seated relations of oppression on which this house of cards stands. Casas-Cortés is positive about the focus on the work of care and the elaboration of experiments in collective care work in movement spaces. What this misses is that such work has not done anything outside activist scenes and movement spaces to ameliorate the consequences of capitalist accumulation, let alone contest the larger social dynamic enforced by capitalist relations that renders life more alienated and insecure for those compelled to sell their labor under it. Without a better story offering real alternatives for collective liberation that moves people to organize for a better world, fascists step eagerly and opportunistically into this gap (Lyons 2018; Lyons et al. 2017; Ross 2016). While antifascists have risen to the challenge of meeting the new far right in the streets and on screens to contest it (Bray 2017), the left in Europe and

North America has failed to offer a vision of political possibility that is capable of galvanizing people to make the jump to other ways of living together.

I am convinced that Casas-Cortés is right in recentring movement knowledge and the political possibilities offered, in glimpses at least, by “precarity pride.” But the story told here is too laudatory and hopeful and too neglectful of the way precarity can be weaponized by violent authoritarians for their fascistic ends. Particularly in dark political times, those of us who work as scholar-activists need to account for the ways some of that work may also participate, however unwittingly, in making us comfortable with failure, reconciling us with the status quo, and setting the stage for the rising of a new far right. I think that the uses and abuses of the politics of precarity, along with thorny issues of identity, need a responsible accounting.

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#### Marianne Maeckelbergh

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This paper addresses the notion of precarity by bringing scholarly literature (especially Anglo-Saxon scholarship and in particular the work of Guy Standing) into dialogue with activist theorizing of precarity to show that precarity has a more ambivalent political significance than is often assumed. Through an examination of the theory building that takes place within feminist collectives in Spain (and France and Italy, to a lesser extent), the author argues that precarity should be understood as potentially having a productive capacity—that it can function as a space of political creation. The aim of this dialogue is to show that social movements are knowledge producers in their own right and that we can better understand the political importance of precarity if we take this knowledge production seriously. The real value here is that the author presents social movements not as a subject of study (although they are also this) but as knowledge producers that have much to teach us. In this sense she is in line with the most recent anthropological scholarship of social movements, which advocates for a militant, activist, engaged ethnography not only as a methodological tool in the field but also as a mode of analysis (e.g., Juris and Khasnabish 2013).

This creates an interesting tension in the text, as it unsettles the distinction between “ethnographic data” and “literature.” Are the texts written by these activist theorists ethnographic materials, or are they literature to be cited alongside and in dialogue with other scholarly literature? This question is not explicitly addressed in the article but is instead raised by the nature of the argument. The tension lies in the author treat-

ing activist theorizing as both ethnography and scholarship at once. As a result, the distinction between ethnography and literature becomes a question of textual form, in which the author treats each sentence as either ethnography or literature and continuously moves between attributing one of these two statuses to quotes from the activists with whom she works. Which status the author chooses to attribute is, of course, political. This article resolves this implicit tension in perhaps the best possible way by presenting the movement actors as equal interlocutors who can offer not only ethnographic snippets but also analytical insights that transform the way we understand political processes and analytical concepts.

Several useful lines of analysis are generated by this approach. First, we see the history of the notion of precarity in a longer time frame that centers social movements in southern Europe as a key site of generation. Second, we can see how movements link the precarity of labor to the privatization of social services, resulting in a more collective and social notion of the precarization of life. Third, precarity emerges as a highly diverse lived experience that not only is linked to the degeneration of labor laws and social services but also is a spatial-temporal continuum that manifests differently for different actors even as it unites these actors in shared identities or alliances. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the author shows that movements transform the vulnerability of precarity from an individual problem into a collective process aimed at the creation of new forms of social organization, which, in turn, allows for an analysis of responses to precarity in terms of strategies of “opening” rather than merely “coping.”

What I miss in this piece is precisely more information about these new forms of social organization. In other words, I miss the link between the way we understand a problem (or concept) and the solution that we consequently propose: the link between knowledge and action—a link that is central to movements. Movements often come to different understandings of concepts in part because the analysis is guided by the question of what to do about a problem and not merely by a desire to understand the problem. An important part of movement analysis and why they can teach us so much is therefore the question of the circumstances under which a productive understanding becomes possible—of the circumstances under which it becomes possible to act collectively on our knowledge and to what end. Standing’s (2012) analysis of precarity leads him to see deliberative democracy as a solution, but I suspect that this is a very different solution from those suggested by the movements researched here. The author writes that the solutions envisioned by precarity movements are “not understood as participation in electoral representative democracies but as a broader field of antagonism and collective recomposition,” but this remains vague. One way to close this gap would be to more directly engage movement theories about the conditions under which precarity can become a productive capacity by showing us more ethnography of the larger set of political practices and beliefs that shapes this understanding of precarity. If movements understand “precarity as a condition of vulnerability

filled with political potential,” then it seems necessary to ask under which circumstances this vulnerability can become potential. Or are we meant to believe that it is naturally potent? An exploration of the broader movement practices might be beyond the scope of this article, but it would help to highlight how this more ambiguous understanding of precarity is linked to the kind of political relations needed to end precariousness. I imagine that such an analysis would highlight the autonomous politics of horizontal, collective forms of self-management that are hinted at in this article but that are not described. I imagine that the author has much to say on this subject, but here the question remains largely unaddressed.

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Casas-Cortés offers an alternative genealogy of the concept of precarity that focuses not on its theorization within the English-speaking academy but on its practical conceptualization within social movements at the beginning of this century. In doing so, she makes two substantial arguments: first, social movements themselves are important knowledge producers, and, second, there are key differences between the concepts of precarity as elaborated by movements and by their academic counterpart. Social movements develop concepts as political tools because of what they do, the practices they incite, and the worlds they bring into being. This use of concepts differs greatly from those that tend to abound in academia, especially those dedicated to describing a reality through the invention and assignment of fixed categories.

Casas-Cortés’s alternative genealogy centers the work of various activist collectives, especially *Precarias a la Deriva*. This militant research collective from Madrid was responsible for some of the most prolific theoretical and methodological production around precarity through the tactics of the picket survey and feminist drift as simultaneous research and political interventions, allowing them both to capture the diversity of and to find commonality in the heterogeneous experiences of women’s precarity. Meanwhile, other collectives such as the Frassanito Collective or Edu-factory Collective developed their understandings of precarity with slightly different focuses, but always emphasizing its force as a political concept.

These collectives, for the most part, remained on the margins of the academy, and little of their work has been translated into English, although they did write prolifically in journals and publications in the activist circuit. While this partially accounts for why this work has not been picked up in academic conversations, something else is at stake here: another way of conceptualizing knowledge production. Here we could also look to the work of *Colectivo Situaciones*, a militant research collective based in Argentina that worked closely with a number of social movements, most notably an unemployed workers’ organization.

It defined research militancy as a practice that challenges the subject-object divide, “nonobjectifying research,” an alternative to both academic research, which claimed to be neutral, and anti-intellectual activism, which assumed that it already had all the answers (*Colectivo Situaciones* and MTD de Solano 2002). This challenges academic research based on certain ideas of objectivity, the ownership of knowledge (it should be noted that this precarious writing is always signed by collectives, not individual authors), and the aims of knowledge.

These theorizations of precarity aim to make political interventions, which we can see in the three aspects of the concept developed by the collective analyses discussed by Casas-Cortés. The first element understands precarity in terms of the labor market and job insecurity, referring to the flexibilization of labor contracts, wage stagnation, and the loss of benefits and rights associated with employment, as well as a general lack of stability associated with work. These conditions make it particularly hard to organize (it is especially diverse; there is no shared space or time of work). But conceptualizing precarity in this way, not as a sociological description but as an idea force, enables a new composition of the working class. As *Precarias a la Deriva* showed, understanding precarity this way allowed for bringing together very diverse people, from domestic employees to freelancers, without flattening or ignoring differences but rather by searching for common points as the beginnings of political organization.

Second, these collectives conceptualize precarity in terms of existential precarity, in which life itself is seen as precarious because of war, famine, climate change, or the more generalized conditions of vulnerability and dependence. This is also often related to issues of social reproduction—precarity in health care, housing, education—and a general breakdown of social trust. More recently, other collectives have analyzed precarity as the result of extracting value from life itself, challenging the division between productive and reproductive labor, formal and informal work, and so on and thus connecting this existential precarity with labor insecurity (Gago 2019; Gago and Mezzadra 2017). Additionally, the focus on existential precarity need not only be negative: emphasizing life’s inherent vulnerability also opens the door to recognizing our interdependence, that people need each other (and a whole host of nonhuman actors) in order to be able to survive (Gil 2018; Pérez Orozco 2014). This could be the starting point of a new politics based on interdependence and caring for life in common.

Third, precarity is understood in terms of “permanent mobility,” in which experiences of migration are key. While some accounts emphasize the specific precarity experienced by migrants as a result of not having papers or full legal rights in their destination country, being subjected to extreme labor precarity, or losing family and support networks because of migration, the collectives discussed by Casas-Cortés instead emphasize how mobility is becoming a constant condition across this precarious class. This conceptualization allows us to find common elements among different experiences, understand the multiple ways in which contemporary capitalism encourages or forces migration,



and use that as a basis for political organizing, without losing sight of the idea of migration as a fundamental right and desire. Here the perspectives of the autonomy of migration are particularly important for understanding migrants not as victims but as political subjects (Mezzadra 2005; Viewpoint Collective 2018).

Casas-Cortés highlights how the movements and collectives that originally elaborated the concept of precarity focused not only on its negative meaning as a lack but also on its ambiguous and at times even positive condition, what she refers to as “precarity pride.” What this means is that the concept of precarity was used not only to name an existing or an emerging class but also to actively construct a new subjectivity, a new source of collective identity that was able to mobilize people and new ways of acting. This remains important to this day, as precarity continues to define life in multiple ways, including within academia. Perhaps, then, academic communities could learn from these collective, movement-based theorizations to further elaborate concepts in ways that open pathways to organize change in the conditions of that knowledge production itself.

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#### Marta Pérez Pérez and Ainhoa Montoya

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In her article, Casas-Cortés asserts the importance of southern European social movements’ conceptualizations of precarity, which managed to capture the ambiguity inherent to human experiences of insecurity. She argues that the legacy of these movements, unacknowledged by Anglo-Saxon scholarship, allows for a notion of precarity that accounts for both vulnerability and the political openings that come with it. They have explored precarity as a process and relation rather than simply as “a category” that describes vulnerable subjects. Among those movements, the author draws on Precarias a la Deriva, in Spain, and the Italian autonomous movement. Having ignored these precedents, she suggests, scholarship has not managed to capture precarity’s political potential. We concede with Casas-Cortés on the epistemic justice and political relevance involved in bringing these precedents into dialogue with the scholarship on precarity.

In our own discussions about precarity in academia, we have emphasized the need to go beyond the labor contract in order to explore the “invisible aspects of precarity that materialise in the neoliberal practices to which we adhere” (Pérez and Montoya 2018:9). We have sought to capture the ambiguities of current academic work, the “in-betweens” in which

precarization materializes. We (academics) often find ourselves between the pleasure we obtain from doing research and the daily anxiety about our lack of time, reinforced by the pressure of audit cultures; between the slow pace required to think and write and the “publish or perish” logic; between the joy of working with students and the increasing devaluing of teaching; between the ethical and political commitments we acquire while doing research and the limited time and resources to fulfill them; and, of course, between the low-paid or unpaid work in which we often engage, which extends our working hours well beyond contract recognition, and our privileged position given the social and cultural capital accrued through our academic careers. Labor conditions are just only a part of a continuum of the “precarization of existence,” a process that is affecting both universities and academics’ subjectivities. Recognizing this carries political potential.

Like Casas-Cortés, we have argued that the analysis of the relationships between precarious labor conditions, institutions, and subjectivities opens the door for a politicization of precarity. The Italian autonomous movement offers rich examples of a praxis relating precarity and collective action, as the author points out. In this sense, we consider the notion of “extraneity” (*estraneità*) one worth introducing in the scholarly approaches to precarity. In his book *Almas al Trabajo* (Berardi Bifo 2016), philosopher and activist of the Italian *autonomismo* Franco Berardi Bifo reflects on the Marxian notion of alienation vis-à-vis alienation as *estraneità*. If the former is an excision between life and work and the suffering that goes with the worker’s dependency on capital, the latter is a rejection of work altogether, a divestment from capital’s interests, and the point of departure to create autonomous communities. Alienation as *estraneità* is thus a notion related to precarity as conceptualized by European social movements that emerges from a political praxis and carries within it an emancipatory potential. The Marxian notion of alienation does not suffice to capture today’s ambiguous relationships between humans and work—especially when cognitive work extends into people’s daily life, requiring greater availability and adherence, and when disposability and insecurity are common experiences.

Coming back to our discussions on precarity in academia, to address precarization from the vantage point of *estraneità* entails questioning universities’ neoliberal turn and the transformation of subjectivities that comes along with it. If individualization and competition among academics are at the center of the neoliberal university, to practice *estraneità* requires a critique that directs itself toward our own practices as well as the university’s—a critique that is capable of producing another way of governing ourselves (Butler 2001; Foucault 1997) made of collectivization and collaboration, as well as different aspirations, and that necessarily asks the question of what other practices and imaginaries we wish would govern the university and academic work (Pérez and Montoya 2018).

The emancipatory potential of *estraneità* is clear in knowledge production processes outside academia that are guided by collective action. To use Casas-Cortés’s references, the *piquete-encuesta*

and the *deriva*, both devised by the feminist collective Precarias a la Deriva, are methodologies and reflexive practices that submit generalizations to the test of embodied stories and are able to produce, in the same process, both theory and organization for action (Malo de Molina 2004). Both the *piquete-encuesta* and the *deriva* helped this collective to explore precarity from the margins of the labor market: precarious, informal, or domestic female workers asked their counterparts to reflect on their own experiences of precarity and the mobility thereof. In doing so, the intermittent and uncertain nature of labor was revealed, and detachment from this kind of labor was possible, proving to be an opportunity for participants to construct bonds and alliances that challenge and overcome aspects of their own precarity.

However, as Precarias a la Deriva pointed out, the political potential of those bonds and alliances is not easy to foster in the face of the differential distribution of precarity: migrant domestic female workers and women developing precarious cognitive labor face the challenge of tracing commonalities through their experiences, which differ, among other things, in labor rights and social and cultural capital. In the academic context, we encountered this tension when reflecting on the experiences of precarious academics vis-à-vis jobs with less social recognition (Ávila, Ayala, and García 2018), as well as when examining racialized and class-based differences within academia itself (Touhouliotis 2018). Yet, as Casas-Cortés argues, to theoretically and practically address this differential distribution of precarity opens the path for the production of knowledge that not only explores but also produces complex and concrete alliances for action—and the relationship between migrants' struggles and the southern European movements that developed a sort of "precarity pride" is a case in point.

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#### Knowledge Producers, Social Responses to Precariousness, and the Political Mobilization of Precarity: A Comment on "Precarious Writings"

The reading of "Precarious Writings" presents a reflection on the contribution of various social groups to the resignification of contemporary precarity and the processes of its politicization in southern Europe. The text reviews the specific contributions that have been made in this regard over the past decade by groups within the frameworks of feminism, occupation, urban movements, and the fight against precariousness in the workplace. The first idea I would like to highlight in the context of this research is the growing polysemy that the concept of precariousness has reached in recent decades. Collo-

qually associated with terms such as unsafety, risk, vulnerability, and uncertainty, precariousness tends to be interpreted as a condition with a scope that is, on the one hand, limited to the absence or lack of something and, on the other hand, circumscribed to the material conditions of existence. This definition tends to be negative, but there are other ways of understanding the processes of precarization, such as places where people live, make decisions, and construct new meanings of precarious existence. Some of these situations become laboratories where forms of life with more propositional and creative contents are experienced as places where innovative social and political practices are developed.

The task of resignifying precariousness is a collective task that is achieved through "cognitive practices" and to which the "intellectual movement" contributes (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). It is certainly a good idea to point out how various collectives such as Precarias a la Deriva, the squatters' movement, Chainworkers, MayDay, and part of the alterglobal movement have contributed to giving a more positive meaning to those people who occupy a subordinate, liminal position and who fall into the category of expelled persons (Sassen 2014) or abject bodies (Butler 1993). Several recent investigations have focused on the structural conditions that have led to the social mobilization of groups that have suffered the onslaught of the 2008 crisis (Della Porta 2015; Flesher Fominaya and Hayes 2018; Giugni and Grasso 2015; Roca, Martín-Díaz, and Díaz-Parra 2018). In them we find good explanations of the structural processes that frame the collective action that mobilizes precariousness, as well as the structures of economic, political, and cultural opportunity that accelerate or stop the protests. Others, to a lesser extent, have explored the constitution of spaces of life and the resignification of daily practices, as well as the occupation of deinstitutionalized spaces from which to transform relations of sociality, production, and social reproduction. In this second group is located the reflection of "Precarious Writings."

The latest research has pointed out the need to rule out the term precarity in the singular and, especially, the one related exclusively to the sphere of production and to replace it with the concept of vital precarity, which attends to different dimensions (relations) of precarity. In this sense, a first reflection would also lead me to substitute the simplification that the image of scarcity associated with situations of precariousness contains with a complex precariousness that would attend to its capacity of subjectivation, of making possible the constitution of a subject that acts and associates with others to resignify the social fact of becoming a precarious person. In the author's terms, it is to "become political actors in conditions of precarity." The suggestion to adopt "migration as a [general] point of view" (Frassanito Network 2006) as "the paradigm to define contemporary practices of production" seems promising. While acknowledging its potential and appropriateness, I would like to point out the possibility of accompanying this reflection by deepening the contribution of other categories that can complete the same approach, such as certain sectors of contemporary youth, among others. On the basis of the available

research on social mobilization in the past decade, no other social category has reached the prominence that youth has played and continues to play in the participation in the mobilizations against the processes of precarization, from the Arab Spring through the Occupy movement, the Spanish Indignados movement, and Geração à Rasca (Precarious Generation) in Portugal.

The processes of contemporary precarization respond to diverse causes and affect a wide range of actors, which points to the relational nature of this category, with significant differences within and between societies. Most of the responses to these processes of precarization have a marked individual expression. In some cases, they become social responses by linking collective collaborative practices and strategies involving a limited number of participants, the effects of which remain in the realm of everyday life. A small number of cases are articulated through interactions, links, forms of organization, and the redefinition of the situation of precariousness until they configure an identity that formulates social demands and develops claims capable of “bridging alliances between disparate and dispersed sectors.” It is true that through “a process of collective theorization” as a “rallying point for renewing subjectivities and forms of collective action,” precarity shows its potential for political transformation. The greatest achievement of this work is to show the collective sociogenesis of the politics of precarity. We are still confronted with the collective task of explaining the gap between the high capacity for resignification of social movements and the still limited transformative effect of their poetics.

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### Ritu Vij

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“Precarious Writings” is a welcome addition to a growing literature on the politics of precarity in the neoliberal present. Animated by a desire to restore “epistemic justice” to the concept, the paper tracks precarity’s genealogy in the poetics and praxis of European artists and activists. The performative politics of precarity pride, enacted in carnivalesque parades on EuroMayDays, the practices of “picket surveys” and “feminist drifting,” and the poetics of images and texts, brings into visibility the work of European grassroots activists as “knowledge producers.” Unlike the negatively marked “dark anthropology” (Ortner 2016) of precarity, which tends to dominate discussion, the paper develops an account of precarity as an affirmative site for the work of political creation that, crucially, centers on the reformulation of identities beyond the capitalist and liberal-democratic (electoral) common sense of a subject-centered modern episteme, which enables a “politics otherwise.”

There is much to commend in the paper, not least the exemplary display of a critical ethnographic practice that is skill-

fully put into conversation with conceptual-theoretical approaches to precarity anchored in continental philosophical thought. Casas-Cortés is also surely right in redirecting attention to the lineages of the concept in autonomist thinking, which mobilized precarity activism in Europe in the late 1970s. That San Precario, the patron saint of the European precarity movement, simultaneously recalls the (Christian) political theology underpinning precarity and its affirmative embrace (Day 1952) but also its etymological roots in Roman law as “precarium” (a loan that could be revoked, leaving the debtor legally vulnerable to another) is indicative of the “radical ambivalence” that the author places at the heart of precarity.

If, following Casas-Cortés, we take seriously the attempt to locate the *differentia specifica* of precarity in its European provenance, not only the historical-political contexts in which concepts emerge (Koselleck 2002) but also the polemical nature of political concepts, the recognition that concepts gain their precise meaning only through concrete antithesis (Schmitt 2007 [1932]), warrant attention. In what follows, I gesture toward some of the ways in which this turn to Europe both is excessive and also does not go far enough.

The turn to Europe provisionally raises at least two questions: Is the precarity activism of political identity reformulation that Casas-Cortés delineates a singular case or an exemplar of the politics of precarity? More importantly, can a performative politics of reformulating political identities—from the individual to the collective—in the case the paper describes be construed as transformative? Within the frozen architectures of state forms (Walker 1994) that continue to circumscribe the domain of politics, practices and enactments of identity reformulation, absent all mediation, remain “merely” social. An expressive performative politics and poetics certainly enables a conceptual and philosophical critique of the depoliticized subject-centered liberal domain of electoral politics but, arguably, only by becoming politically “weightless” (McNay 2014), that is, unable to effect material change. It is, perhaps, no accident that in the absence of any sign of what a transformational politics might look like in the current regime of capital, it is, ironically, the quintessentially liberal project of recasting the self that is construed as political.

The problem, however, as I see it, is not one that originates with Casas-Cortés’s formulation per se but one that stems principally from the author’s attempt to anchor an account of precarity as political creation in Judith Butler’s vexed reading of precariousness, precarity, and performative politics. Butler’s account is simultaneously wedded to an antifoundationalist account of the subject, that is, the self-dispossession of the (liberal) subject, and a desire to seek a universal referent by positing a Levinasian reading of ontological precariousness as a condition of shared human vulnerability that is generative of an ethics of hospitality. Among the difficulties of reconciling the two, the Hobbesian impulse to impose the self’s vulnerability on another punctuates the translation of a universal ethics of hospitality to politics. The retention, moreover, of a quantitative measure of value and valuation that informs Butler’s notion of



precaritization unwittingly retains a fidelity to the very liberal analytic that it purportedly disavows (Vij 2019). Finally, the methodological individualism that animates Butler's notion of performative politics potentially undermines Casas-Cortés's deployment of it in her own account. Picket surveys and feminist drifting are undoubtedly innovative strategies of political mobilization. That their political virtue obtains, for Casas-Cortés, principally from their rescripting of identities—from the individual to the (relational) collective—is telling, leaving her own account susceptible to the aporias that attend Butler's original formulation.

The author's turn to Europe, however, also does not go far enough. Insofar as precarity as a polemical political concept refutes and negates sovereignty as the regulative ideal of liberal modernity, precarity as insecurity and vulnerability is a specter that haunts the liberal subject. Shaped by regimes of mobility, affect, and labor produced by sovereign practices (of states, subjectivities, and capital), precarity in zones where liberal modernity has been consolidated continues to be tethered to a desire for security, self-possession, and autonomy. In zones where social life and imaginaries gravitate toward other logics, however, where liberal desire and subjectivity remain fugitive, the multiple insecurities that shape modes of being and living lend themselves to ethnographic attunement to the fragility of life but escape the conceptual reach of an analytic of precarity as a limiting condition of sovereignty. Recognition of this complex entanglement of precarity with sovereignty is discernible in the paper, albeit implicitly, in its affirmative telling of the self-dispossession precarity activism instantiates and in its scripting of migrants into the European story not simply as empiric referents of embodied precarity but as people who "while living in Europe . . . [are] not quite European" by virtue of "rejecting its modern episteme" (Dzenovska and De Genova 2018, cited in Casas-Cortés). This turn to and away from Europe, through a philosophical repertoire that is decidedly European, suggests that there is far more going on in the attempt to undo sovereignty through an embrace of precarity and its repudiation of a modern episteme. Rereading the European archive of images, texts, and interviews assembled in the paper through precarity's entanglements with sovereignty may prove more generative.

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This article by Maribel Casas-Cortés constitutes a theoretical tour de force on the genealogy of the concept of precarity and, thus, a valuable contribution to the flourishing study on the subject from the point of view of "autonomous knowledge production" (see also Shukaitis, Graeber, and Biddle 2007). It is a piece and product of the critical anthropological thinking that has characterized an ethnographic turn in contemporary

social movement studies (Graeber 2009; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Kioupkiolis 2020*b*; Kioupkiolis et al. 2017; Maeckelbergh 2009; Papapavlou 2015) relevant to the radical imagination project of Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), which seeks to catalyze critical dialogues among activists, members of local communities, and researchers, crafting new spaces of debate, imagination, and creativity (Kioupkiolis 2020*a*). In this framework, this paper both acknowledges and defies "indigenous" hegemonies of academia in nonacademic knowledge, which, as the author illustrates, has contributed immensely in the elaboration of the concept of precarity.

The recognition of social movements as knowledge producers by anthropologists reshapes the field on a basis that breaks with the colonialist presuppositions of the neutral observer and the idea of cultures as separated and self-contained units, as well as the notion that knowledge production is something that happens not only within the academy but also in the field (Kioupkiolis 2020*a*). As the author has previously suggested (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2013), ethnographers of social movements are just participants in a system of knowledge, and as such, they are the producers of a collective knowledge that arises from the field.

In the realm of precarity studies, this analysis is invaluable not only as a rich theoretical contribution but also because it is in tune with emerging scholarship that attempts to give voice and visibility to its own precarious subjectivities (Casas-Cortés 2014; Coin 2017; Ferreira 2017; Loher, Stoica, and Strasser 2019; Nader 2017; Platzer and Allison 2018). Casas-Cortés shows that precarity should be studied as an intersectional notion that embraces all workers in precarious conditions, even the knowledge workers, the *cognitariat*, a category of workers in which many of us belong. After all, as Alexander Gallas (2018) puts it, "In important ways scientists are no different from other workers as they use both tangible and cognitive materials as well as their brains, muscles, nerves, hands to create and distribute a distinctive labour product, which is knowledge" (69). As such, the *cognitariat* can be seen as a participant in a system of knowledge that is fed both by academic and by empirical, firsthand, existential perceptions, which is exactly what the article is advocating for.

Another point I would like to stress is the autonomy of migration discussed in the article. She writes, "Despite clear differences and hierarchies, a growing awareness of potential migranthood leads to a sense of shared perspective among very different singularities." I would like to comment on this by sharing a personal experience: I have myself been a precarious worker in academia for over a decade now, and, during one of my short-term contracts abroad, I had to face the difficulties of the border regime of the country I was living in, as if being contingent faculty were not enough. In the midst of my predicament, I read a post by a contact on one of my social media accounts complaining about how asylum seekers in my own country were treated very well and in many cases much better than the country's nationals. Facing my own worries at the time, I commented on the post by saying that being an immigrant

myself, I knew very well what a difficult task it was and that posts like that could not even begin to grasp the complexities, struggles, frustrations, and defeats that an immigrant feels without even having to apply for asylum. The author of the post replied that I had nothing in common with the asylum seekers and the immigrants she was referring to. Yet—without overlooking the impossible situation that those people were in, compared with mine—that post struck a chord in me, as I knew that even from a privileged position my subjectivity was informed by issues similar to theirs, and in this case, I came out of the closet, declaring my shared identity with them and, yes, my pride, as Casas-Cortés very eloquently puts it. This personal account is very much in line with what Casas-Cortés claims when she writes that everlasting mobility constitutes one of the main activist understandings of precarity, as it not only draws connections among apparently distant situations but also renders precarity as a site of the political, which is the last point I want to discuss.

Jim Thomas (1993) writes that “critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose” (4), and I believe that one of the main qualities of this article is that it engages critically with knowledge production not only for the sake of acknowledging the contribution of social movements to the notion of precarity but also for the purpose of showing that this contribution proposes alternative politics. This, in turn, proposes a study of the political outside mainstream electoral politics but instead in the everyday collective politics of survival, and anthropologists are methodologically equipped to be in the forefront of studying the radical political imagination. The works of Ghassan Hage (2012) on “alterpolitics,” James C. Scott (1990) on the “infrapolitical” in the realm of anthropology, and, more recently, Alexandros Kioupiolis on “heteropolitics,” which comes from the realm of political theory and engages with ethnography and critical anthropology (<http://heteropolitics.net>), are very much in discussion with this article, which constitutes not only an attempt to redefine precarity through feedback from on-the-ground struggles but also an invitation to rethink the political as a product of such struggles and knowledge as a product of politics.

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## Reply

I would like to express my appreciation for the constructive and thorough engagements with my work from each of you. In fact, your specific observations have taught me a lot. What is more intriguing for me about your graceful and insightful comments is how the main premise advanced in this paper has produced resonances across your distinct intellectual-political trajectories. I am pleased that *Current Anthropology* provides this space to keep broadening those resonances.

First of all, regardless of specific observations, all of you seem to align with the core argument put forward in this piece,

namely the rethinking of social movements as situated sources of knowledge production. This thesis entails epistemological, methodological, and ontological consequences to be further explored and pursued beyond the scope of this paper. Yet this attempt to engage such a conceptual shift in the study of collective action is overall well received among all of you, each from different fields and distinct geographical locations (Argentina, Basque Country, Belgium, Canada, Greece, Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom). What is exciting about this coincidence is that this general approval might signal a growing consensus among scholars working on social movements to radically shift gears. That is, to move beyond the objectifying research perspective where movements are looked on from a bird's-eye view, waiting to be scrutinized and analyzed according to untouchable grand theories, usually from the Anglo-Saxon or French academies. Besides the need to overcome problematic epistemological hierarchies grounded in current geopolitics of knowledge, this move to challenge the regular research modus operandi within the field of social movement studies liberates the object of study to “be able to speak.” This eye to eye gaze toward collective action has been pioneered by ethnographies of social movements (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008; Escobar 1998, 2008; Graeber 2009; Hess 2015; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Maeckelbergh 2009). As such, the flourishing field of the anthropology of social movements has been able to take up the challenge of studying and writing about movements as both objects and subjects of knowledge, dealing with this epistemological conundrum and with the consequent methodological and reflexive entanglements. I learned how intricate yet necessary this challenge is during my PhD program in anthropology at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. The interdisciplinary discussions held regularly by the Social Movements Working Group (SMWG) in the anthropology building were always energetic and at times unsettling. The conveners were mainly professors, graduate students, and a few undergraduate students coming from disciplines such as anthropology, geography, sociology, history, and cultural studies and science and technology studies and also from multiple geographies of origin. The underlying ethos in the SMWG was to practice critical proximity to, rather than critical distance from, social justice movements and to rethink research approaches according to this. The main sources of inspiration for such analytical and methodological transformations were the readings we collectively discussed during our weekly assembly-like meetings: in particular, certain trends within decolonial theory, feminist epistemology, and science and technology studies approaches to complex organizations, as well as classics of popular education and participatory action research. We also searched for contemporary initiatives on activist research; in particular, we were inspired by the writings of Colectivo Situaciones, a self-named “militant research group” based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We read its publications and hosted Diego Stulzwerk and Veronica Gago as guest speakers at University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Mason-Deese, cofounder of a militant cartography collective (3Cs), points to

the influence of Colectivo Situaciones in my argument. This is rightly so and is visible in the trajectory of the very first cohort of the SMWG. All SMWG participants, on their own terms, have tried to mesh research on and with movements with the search for social justice venues. It was precisely in this caring and critically thinking environment where I grew up as a scholar of collective action able to identify and articulate the need for a “knowledge turn” in the study of social movements, one of the key contributions of this article. Thanks to this net of scholars and those lively discussions tattooed in my scholarly work, I am able to write about precarity initiatives in the way I do. In my article, activist writings are put in tandem with scholarly productions in a “dialogue.” This is appreciated by Ritu Vij as an “exemplary display of a critical ethnographic practice that is skillfully put into conversation with”—or, as noticed by Marianne Maeckelbergh, creating—“an interesting tension in the text, as it unsettles the distinction between ‘ethnographic data’ and ‘literature.’” Building on the premise of social movements as knowledge producers in their own right, I intentionally quote precarity activists as interlocutors and, in this case, place them as “alternative founders” of the very cutting-edge topic of precarity. Thank you for mentioning this tension created by the continuous back and forth of movements as both ethnographic data and theoretical literature. Without making it explicit, I wanted this textual strategy to speak by itself, “presenting the movement actors as equal interlocutors who can offer not only ethnographic snippets but also analytical insights that transform the way we understand political processes and analytical concepts,” as Maeckelbergh puts it. For me, this observation coming from a refined ethnographer of social movements is very valuable since I saw in her work *The Will of the Many* (Maeckelbergh 2009) a sign of this analytical turn, positing alterglobalization movements as redefining the concept and praxis of democracy.

As such, the SMWG family tree gave me strength to do “epistemic justice,” as noted by Pérez and Montoya, and led me to publish about this alternative genealogy of the concept of precarity buried in southern European debates. I am very pleased to learn that the grassroots notion of precarity described in this paper, as both grounded in existential vulnerability and holding open a potential for political revalorization, keeps being put to work in the context of the neoliberal university (Edu-factory Collective 2009). Pérez and Montoya’s use of *estraneitá* and the ways that collective practices of knowledge production can facilitate a “divestment from capital’s interests” are examples of this. I am confident of the productive uses of this version of precarity in regard to its analytical prism as able to acknowledge “differential distribution[s] of precarity” and to articulate “complex . . . alliances for action,” as rightly pointed out in their work on academia. Following Benjamín Tejerina, coming from a more sociological take on social action, these movements facing austerity and labor market flexibilization not only were signaling precarity as lack and scarcity but also were able to develop spaces for “creation and innovation” in those structural circumstances. That is, they were becoming “lab-

oratories where forms of life with more propositional and creative contents are experienced.” Nonetheless, his comment raises a final concern that is also present in the comments by Khasnabish, Maeckelbergh, and Vij.

The shared concern in Tejerina’s words is about the “collective task of explaining the gap between the high capacity for resignification of social movements and the still limited transformative effect of their poetics.” Yes, I agree, the microscale of the interventions described in this paper—a drift, a picket survey—and the textual productions by Precarias a la Deriva might seem futile in the context of a continued and unquestionable neoliberal path topped by eccentric right-wing politicians supported by stagnant electoral systems. I can feel the frustration expressed by Khasnabish, an activist-scholar known for his appraisals of the viral resonances of the Zapatista uprising and their “radical imagination.” I share how, despite all the politics of hope brought by alterglobalization movements and the waves of Occupy mobilizations coming out of the Arab Spring, Khasnabish stresses the disappointing socioeconomic and political scenario used by fascists to grow in numbers and in arguments. While sharing this concern, though, I need to admit my own enthusiasm on encountering these knowledge practices. These are intentional experiments of militant research aimed at producing a kind of inspiring narrative around precarious youth: “Our goal, after all, is mythopoesis” (Precarias a la Deriva participant, 2007). As such, the material by Precarias a la Deriva spoke to me at three different levels, as a female scholar under different temporary contracts and several visa categories at US universities, as a participant in Direct Action Network and other grassroots initiatives of the global justice movement, and as an anthropologist exploring social theories relevant to our times. On encountering the grassroots concept of precarity, this led me to explore it further and translate it to the US context.

Still, there is room to ponder the shared concern expressed in this set of comments, basically a claim about how one assesses and translates these micropractices into larger-scale transformations. Yes, these efforts were indeed minoritarian. Yet there is value in the concepts they developed and deployed to think through and tackle current conditions. How? To clarify Khasnabish’s point, precarity is not relevant because of its novelty, even though there was a moment when precarity felt new among a generation born out of welfare state experiences in certain European countries, Japan, Argentina, Uruguay, Canada, and, to a lesser extent, the United States. In contrast to the assumed norm of lifelong jobs and the financial security of their parents, this precarious generation (sometimes equivalent to millennials in North America) felt that things were different and that old formulas and classical mainstream unions were not enough. This is how a feeling of newness permeated the festivities of precarity MayDays, which went viral, reaching from Milan to Tokyo. Soon, though, tendencies within precarity struggles realized that this golden age of the welfare state was an exception rather than the norm of capitalism (Mitropoulos 2005). In fact, many precarity activists devoured the very same autonomous historical readings Khasnabish mentioned to trace the



*longue durée* production of precarity by capitalist developments. Instead of pretending that it is a new phenomenon or a trendy sociological category, movements unfold precarity as a “toolbox concept” that they can use to analyze transformations from within and intervene accordingly. As such, precarity movements were able to identify a common thread toward the “precarization of life.” While they acknowledged differential impacts, there was nonetheless a similarity worth noticing: a shared growing tendency toward uncertainty. The capitalist formula for succeeding at making profit for a few was based not only on “proletarians’ exploitation” but also on an induced generalization of vulnerable conditions across the board. As such, despite rising financial and material abundance, capitalism seemed to work by not attending to the fundamental needs of the many. This push toward existential precarity is seen well before post-Fordism and well beyond workers *per se*. The value of precarity, in contrast with the formulation of precariat, goes beyond the naming of a new revolutionary labor-based subject such as “proletarians in the making.” Distancing itself from categorical identity politics, precarity is above all a multilayered concept attempting to connect differential marginal experiences. In the European case, these connections were made mainly across questions of age, gender, occupation, and migration status. It is true that race was not initially engaged as an explicit point of connection, and movements in Europe will benefit greatly from rich antiracist struggles elsewhere, as I argue in another piece (Casas-Cortés, forthcoming). Thus, while some uses of precarity as an analytic may tend “to ignore . . . Indigenous and Black people,” this is by no means a foregone conclusion. The precarity mode of governance, based on making life more uncertain (Lorey 2015), calls for a “transversal politics” (Yuval-Davis 1999), that is, overcoming token politics based on overarching dichotomies, which can hide multiple power relations and realities within individuals or collectivities. In this way, precarity challenges one-way and top-down solidarity work, such as conventional campaigns toward refugees. Therefore, to the critique that precarity resonates and works only for those in relative “privilege,” I would respond that the transversal power of this concept reached the spheres of unregulated care work and unwaged domestic work, the overworked and underpaid sectors of the cultural industries and knowledge factories, and the different challenges faced by migrant struggles. The No-Border Alliance, made of undocumented migrants and underemployed youth in the city of Zaragoza, Spain, made this clear: “The problem is not illegality because of not having documents; our common problem is precarity” (slogan on political poster in Pantera Rossa Social Center, Zaragoza, 2010).

As such, precarity is worth rescuing because it allows not only for coping with but also for opening possibilities, concretely unexpected alliances for thinking outside the box of conventional repertoires of politics. This is how precarity pride kicks in, fueling a personal and social imagination that is able to break through dichotomies at times of uncertainty. This is graphically grasped by the commentator Voulvouli in her reflexive account about being contingent faculty from Greece

working abroad and feeling affinity with asylum seekers in her home country. Concretely, she focuses on the growing awareness of potential migranhood, allowing for temporary connectivity between asylum seekers and short-term, underpaid faculty on the move. I am happy that Voulvouli makes this apparently single-issue topic of migration central to her response. In fact, precarity as an intersectional concept, embracing workers and nonworkers, renders mobility one of the main shared experiences of uncertainty. Mason-Deese and Voulvouli bring up autonomy of migration (AoM) as a school of thought that inspired a large section of European precarity struggles, taking migration as a “point of view,” with all that this situated perspective entails. Following that tradition, then, the very notion of politics radically shifts. Yann Moulier Boutang, one of the conceptual founders of AoM, distinguishes between voice and exit. Politics as voice is based on representational strategies through explicit claims posed by large groups of people. Politics as exit is based on operationalizing escapes out of situations of criminalization, dispossession, containment, exploitation, and extermination. He posits the historical escapes organized by slaves as one of the main examples of politics as exit (Boutang 1998). Rather than overromanticizing micropolitics, this allows for a renewed appreciation of contentious processes that involve mobility and require invisibility. From the start, precarity struggles acknowledged their limited scale of action: “Please, do not call us movements, we are underground initiatives exchanging materials internationally, coming up with a necessary lexicon to begin to face our dislocated conditions” (Precarias a la Deriva participant, 2008). That is, behind the picket survey was not the intention of provoking an alternative mass general strike, that is, politics as voice. In contrast, this kind of militant research intervention, including writing texts, seemed to open a line of exit out of politics as usual in search of different ways to articulate singularities through a shared renovated vocabulary, even mythology. As such, they were able to resonate within broader constellations of discontent, for instance, contributing to the new wave of feminism with its current attention to the care and precarity nexus.

I finally arrive to Vij’s important argument about how using Butler’s take on precarity might limit the very reading of precarity struggles. Building on his previous critical engagement with Butler’s notion of precarity, Vij warns us of the perils of using modern liberal thinking to reimagine politics, stating that this ultimately is limited to “recasting the self” and is unable to “effect material change.” The previous concern about the real transformative potential of these initiatives rises again, but not only in terms of scale, from micro- to macropolitics. This time Vij points to a conceptual limitation coming from grounding precarity in the liberal notion of sovereign individuality traceable to Hobbes. As such, “Butler’s notion of precaritization unwittingly retains a fidelity to the very liberal analytic that it purportedly disavows” (Vij 2019).

Thus, precarity struggles à la Butler might reveal a limited inward politics of self-redefinition, transforming individual identities able to offer at most a politics of mutual hospitality. If I

understand correctly, then, following this track, my reading would “turn to Europe” excessively, coming back to its controversial “methodological individualism” positing precarity politics as a redefinition of identities. I found this observation very pertinent and enriching and hope that in my future renderings of precarity struggles I ensure that I stress enough how identity reformulation was not the main goal. Rather, these initiatives worked toward actual changes on the ground: advancing alternative ways of social organization through shifting infrastructures such as meeting places, care practices, and property regimes and influencing migration, labor and disability legislation, and so on. Still, I appreciate Vij’s clarity in unveiling how precarity’s call for uncertainty does not reach far enough since it is not able to fully embrace the “fragility of life” lived and accepted in many other places, as if there were a kind of underlying nostalgia toward security and autonomy. I might need to agree that precarity as deployed by southern European struggles takes the secured individual as its imaginary or point of departure, even if it does not want to end there. As such, it is not yet able to fully unfold my promised “politics otherwise” without reaching those “zones where social life and imaginaries gravitate toward other logics.” In other words, I recognize that the grassroots concept of precarity might be somehow grounded within the liberal modern episteme, even though, inspired by Arturo Escobar’s decolonial proposal, I flirted for a while with the reading of precarity as an example of decolonial thinking. For a time, I was convinced that precarity was developing in other European spaces, not mainstream ones, but drifting in the margins of Europe and mingling with the postcolonial, reading Fanon and Foucault together to build effective temporary alliances and improve a commonly inhabited ground. I do think that there was a desire to achieve these alliances, which lead to the search for a “mestizo politics,” an emphasis on care, and embodied no-border work. In this sense, there remains a tension between the nostalgia of a secured individual and the need to embrace life under increasing uncertainty. It is precisely the practices of knowledge production that fuel a precarious way of thinking and living, able to “delete and rewrite” politics as usual toward other horizons (Casas-Cortés 2019).

—Maribel Casas-Cortés

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