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Nicklas Freisleben Lund, Christine Hamm, Ingrid Nestås Mathisen & Magnus Nilsson (eds.)

Precarisation Across Literatures

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Introduction:

Precarisation Across Literatures

In 2009, the Swedish author Kristian Lundberg (1966–2022) published the critically acclaimed narrative *Yarden* [The Yard]. The poetic prose text – which has been translated into numerous languages and adapted for both screen and stage – presents a stark portrayal of, and explores the broader social significance of, the author's experiences as a casual worker at the so-called *yard* in Malmö: a 'transshipment hub' where imported cars are loaded on and off ships.

In the terminology of this volume, *Yarden* is an illuminating example of how precarisation is depicted in literature. Lundberg writes about working outdoors in the cold, wet, and windy winter without adequate protective clothing; he describes how low-paid temporary labour not only makes everyday life difficult but also erodes workers' sense of humanity and self-worth; he reflects on the erosion of the Swedish welfare-state and labour-market model and laments the decline of the security they once provided; and he explores how he and other casual workers are rendered invisible, alienated not only from society but also from one another. The narrative also foregrounds his struggle with the interconnected issues of the necessity of writing about these experiences and the difficulties of describing them adequately in literary form.

The dominant style in *Yarden* is restrained, almost monotonous, yet it also exhibits features – such as direct address, repetition, clichéd metaphors, and a lack of nuance – that have been characterised as melodramatic (Hamm 2014, pp. 207–208). This narrative mode serves several functions. It conveys the narrator's loneliness and depression while also signalling the text's political ambitions: it calls on readers to recognise the protagonist's situation and condemn the precarious conditions under which he lives and encourages reflection on how his experiences relate to broader questions of class, work, and identity in contemporary Sweden.

Lundberg was a highly productive author who, over the course of his career, published some forty works across a range of genres, including poetry, prose, and crime fiction. Today, however, he is remembered primarily as the author of *Yarden*, which is widely regarded as a modern classic in his native Sweden and as a central work in contemporary Scandinavian literature. This is arguably due to the way the text captures a widely shared sense of growing social insecurity and, thus, of a diffuse yet increasingly imminent threat of precarisation.

Such experiences are not unique to the Swedish context. Rather, they form part of a broader development in which precarity and precariousness have become key concerns in public, political, as well as academic and cultural discourse around the world. The premise of *Precarisation Across Literatures* is that literature has played a significant role in this development. Authors such as Édouard Louis, Didier Eribon, Ali Smith, Kikuko Tsumura, and many others have not merely depicted experiences of insecurity, thereby bringing them to wider public attention – they and their works have also contributed to shaping the ways in which such experiences and issues are imagined, understood, and debated.

The initial example of *Yarden* illustrates several of the concerns that animate the volume. It describes precarisation not merely as a set of socio-economic conditions but as a phenomenon that is understood and negotiated differently across contexts. These differences become visible through a range of modes of description, narration, and interpretation that reveal different ways of understanding and responding to precarisation.

This perspective informs the editorial framework of the volume and its collection of chapters, all of which explore the kinds of entanglements between literature and precarisation outlined above. In doing so, however, each chapter focuses on particular examples of these relations within specific national contexts. In this sense, the volume seeks to provide readers with a necessarily non-exhaustive overview of precarisation across literatures.

Drawing on distinct national literary archives and traditions, the chapters engage with their material in different ways. Nevertheless, they share a fundamental concern with questions of what literary texts can tell us about precarisation and the economic, social, and political dynamics, including class relations, that shape it, as well as how literature may contribute to struggles against the injustices associated with it.

Precarisation, or: What's in a concept?

In discussions of growing insecurity in contemporary society, British labour economist Guy Standing's *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011) has been particularly influential. Standing argues that intensified economic globalisation and the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism have produced a substantial increase in labour-market and socio-economic insecurity, leading to the emergence of a new social class, the so-called precariat. Another central point of reference is Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), which has informed a line of thought that views precariousness as a fundamental aspect of the human condition.

A key reason for the widespread uptake of concepts such as precarity, the precariat, and precariousness, and for the popularity of theorists such as Standing and Butler, is their capacity to bring seemingly disparate phenomena together within a common framework. This is particularly evident in literary studies, where these concepts have been employed in analyses of themes and motifs ranging from "temporary work contracts to imminent environmental catastrophe, from state violence to pervasive anxiety" (Hogg, 2021, p. 1).

This inclusive capacity is often regarded as a strength, as it enables scholars to "shed new light on the intersecting vulnerabilities of the contemporary moment" (Hogg, 2021, p. 22). A more critical, or at least more cautious, perspective holds that such breadth risks flattening diverse phenomena and experiences, resulting in a loss of precision and perhaps even diminishing the usefulness of these concepts (Lund in press).

Against this background, this volume takes the concept of *precarisation* as its point of departure. The term refers to economic and political processes through which social conditions are systematically rendered insecure. According to Danish social scientists Janne Gleerup, Birger Steen Nielsen, Peter Olsén, and Niels Warring, precarisation "is centred on the organisation and quality of social work, but it does not only concern work. It also includes, for example, opportunities, rights, and security in relation to illness, housing standards, and participation in social and cultural life – in other words, welfare rights" (Gleerup et al. 2018, p. 9; see also

Hirslund, 2019).[1] It is with the aim of dispelling the conceptual fog that can obscure our understanding of these processes that we invite scholars in this volume to investigate specific examples of precarisation.

As such, *precarisation* designates a multidimensional process encompassing historical, political-institutional, and economic developments that produce or intensify social vulnerability and insecurity, particularly in relation to working life. This description maintains analytical precision by linking precarisation to systemic transformations associated with capitalism, while avoiding the conceptual inflation that results when the terminology is extended to encompass all forms of vulnerability.

Precarisation is, as indicated above, generated by capitalism – both in its contemporary neoliberal and globalised forms and in its earlier historical configurations. A central argument informing the volume, however, is that precarisation is mediated by specific institutional and political contexts and structures (see, e.g. Breman & van der Linden, 2014; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 54).

Precarisation can be – and is in various ways being – countered and challenged. For example, workers' exposure to precarity in the labour market may be mitigated through legislation and collective bargaining or compensated for by welfare-state institutions, communities, families, and civil society organisations. Accordingly, the increasing precarity experienced in many parts of the world in recent decades may be understood as a product both of the expansion of capitalism, driven by neoliberal market reforms, globalisation, increasing commodification, and related developments, and of the weakening or transformation of countervailing forces.

This helps explain why experiences of insecurity vary significantly between nations and regions, and between societal models and political regimes. As emphasised by Butler (2009) and Isabel Lorey (2015), precarisation is also unevenly distributed within such contexts: simply put, it affects individuals and groups differently depending on factors such as class, gender, migration status, and generation. Accordingly, labour-market precarity has more serious consequences for working-class people than for academics; the dismantling of welfare-state institutions poses greater challenges for single mothers than for dual-income families; and housing precarity generally affects younger people more than members of older generations.

[1] All translations of non-English quotations are our own, if not otherwise stated.

In this respect, the concept of precarisation highlights not only the expansion of insecurity but also its differentiated and relational character.

In sum, the conceptual framework of *Precarisation Across Literatures* combines Standing's socio-economic and class-based perspective with Lorey's and Butler's emphasis on the uneven distribution of insecurity, while also maintaining that precarisation is shaped by the particular historical situations, geographical settings, and institutional arrangements in which it occurs.

On the working class, the precariat, and community

Before turning to the relationship between literature and precarisation, it is worth briefly addressing several concepts that recur in the volume's discussions of class, precarisation, and collective life: *working class*, *proletariat*, *precariat*, and *community*, as these will recur throughout the volume. Their meanings, however, vary across the individual chapters according to context, theoretical framework, and analytical purpose. Accordingly, the comments below are not intended to establish fixed definitions but rather to indicate how some of the central concepts are used in chapters that follow.

The concept of *the working class* is used in a relatively broad and historically informed sense, referring to social groups whose livelihoods depend primarily on the sale of their labour power and whose access to resources, security, and recognition is shaped by this position. Closely related is the term *proletariat*, which is occasionally employed in a more Marxian sense to designate those who, lacking ownership of the means of production, are structurally situated within exploitative relations of capital.

While rooted in relations of production, the concepts of the working class and the proletariat cannot be reduced to employment status alone, especially when moving into the present. The transformations of capitalist societies have meant that wage labour now encompasses social groups occupying vastly different positions in terms of income, authority, status, and life chances. Consequently, contemporary uses must take into account not only individuals' relationship to production but also their broader position within the distribution of material and immaterial privileges. From this perspective, within this volume, the terms working class and proletariat primarily designate those groups that occupy subordinate positions within the social

distribution of economic, cultural, and political resources and that remain most dependent upon selling their labour under conditions largely beyond their control.

The term *precariat*, popularised by Standing, appears in several of the contributions and in the broader scholarly field to which this volume relates. As discussed in Chapter 1, however, its analytical usefulness remains contested. This is reflected in our decision to give precedence to the concept of *precarisation*, understood as a social process, rather than the related concepts of *precariousness* (an existential condition) and *precariat* (a class position or collective identity). Accordingly, the term precariat is not employed in this volume to denote a clearly bounded social class. Rather, it serves as a flexible heuristic for capturing emerging forms of insecurity that cut across established class positions while simultaneously reshaping contemporary class relations. Across the chapters, the term is used in different ways: in some contributions it refers to groups experiencing persistent labour-market instability, while in others it functions more broadly as a shorthand for conditions of socio-economic insecurity, vulnerability, and marginalisation. Despite these differences, the various uses of the term should be understood as referring broadly to groups and individuals affected by processes of precarisation, albeit in different ways. Indeed, as Christine Hamm and Ingrid Nestås Mathisen demonstrate in Chapter 3, a focus on precarisation rather than class position allows attention to be directed towards groups such as children and young adults, whose experiences of insecurity are often overlooked in class-based analyses.

Finally, the term *community* is employed in a similarly flexible and context-dependent manner. Across the chapters, it may refer to concrete social formations, such as families, neighbourhoods, or worker collectives; to more imagined or affective forms of belonging; or to potential modes of solidarity articulated within literary texts. Rather than presupposing a stable or unified notion of community, the volume explores how communities are variously imagined, negotiated, enacted, and contested across different social, cultural, historical, and literary contexts of precarisation.

Literature(s) and precarisation

Like the body of scholarship on which it draws and which it seeks to supplement, *Precarisation Across Literatures* prompts a fundamental question: why analyse the socio-political phenomenon of precarisation through studies of literature? Some

critics have argued that this risks conflating fictional discourse with social reality (see, e.g. Pierse, 2017). However, objections of this kind have been challenged by scholars both within literary studies (see, e.g. Connell, 2017; Hogg and Simonsen, 2021; Rys and Philipsen, 2021; Entin, 2023; Nilsson, 2025) and, notably, beyond. For instance, in *Hvorfor stiger uligheden – og hvad gør vi ved den?* [Why Is Inequality Rising – and What Can We Do About It?], the Danish economist Birte Larsen (2023, p. 8) complements quantitative analyses with literary examples, arguing that fiction can convey the lived experience of inequality in ways that statistics cannot. Similarly, the sociologist Oliver Nachtwey (2018, pp. 2–3) characterises literature as a "sensitive seismograph" capable of registering profound transformations in contemporary labour markets. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that literary texts do not merely reflect conditions of precarisation but may also provide distinctive insights into how these conditions are experienced, interpreted, negotiated, and contested.

At the same time, much recent research on literature and precarity (see, e.g. Hogg and Simonsen, 2021; Rys and Philipsen, 2021; Connell, 2017) insists that literature's significance extends beyond its diagnostic function. It also has an interventionist dimension: the capacity not only to depict precarisation but – under certain conditions and in some instances – to challenge, contest, and potentially reshape the ways in which it is understood and experienced. This perspective informs and is reflected throughout this volume. A central concern of *Precarisation Across Literatures* is therefore the interplay – and at times the tension – between literature's capacity to explain, analyse, and diagnose conditions of precarisation and its potential to imagine, articulate, and foster alternative forms of solidarity and community.

With that in mind, it is worth reiterating a key premise of the volume, which may be approached from two interrelated perspectives. *First*, literature's relationship to precarisation varies, as already stressed, across different national contexts and the social, historical, and political conditions that shape them. Literary responses are conditioned by the specific forms that precarisation assumes in different societies and institutional settings. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, transformations of the welfare state and labour-market regulation constitute an important backdrop against which literary texts frequently articulate experiences of insecurity (see Chapters 1–3). In Spain, by contrast, precarisation is often represented as a threat to

middle-class stability and social mobility (see Chapter 6), while in contemporary Chinese literature it is closely associated with the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises (see Chapter 10). Furthermore, literary engagements with precarisation differ not only between societies but also within them, as experiences of insecurity are mediated by factors such as class, generation, and other social divisions. In short, rather than engaging with precarisation as a uniform global condition, literary texts respond to the particular ways in which insecurity is manifested within specific social and historical settings.

Second, literary representations of precarisation are shaped not only by social and political conditions but also by literary ones. Traditions, aesthetic conventions, and publishing infrastructures all influence how precarisation is articulated. In Sweden, for instance, many authors – including the above-mentioned Lundberg – draw on the tradition of working-class literature, adapting and renewing forms such as the realist novel, literary reportage, and autobiographical narrative (Nilsson, 2025, pp. 150–159). In other contexts – as the volume's individual contributions demonstrate – different formal strategies emerge, including experimental and fragmented narrative forms that respond to the instability of precarious life. Just as precarisation assumes different forms across social and historical contexts, literary responses to it are shaped by distinct aesthetic traditions, generic conventions, and trends, as well as institutional conditions.

A further premise concerns the question of resistance. While many studies assume that literature not only represents but also resists precarisation, the volume approaches such resistance as an empirical question. Instead of presupposing that literature necessarily performs a critical or transformative function, each chapter investigates how literary texts engage with precarisation in specific contexts.

As a consequence, the individual contributions do not present a uniform picture. In some cases, the analysed works explicitly seek to mobilise readers, foster solidarity, and articulate forms of social and political critique. Such ambitions are evident, for example, in the "summoning" of collective identification discussed in Chapter 8 and in the historically grounded engagements with labour and feminist politics analysed in Chapter 5. In other cases, however, literary responses remain markedly ambivalent. As several contributions show, precarisation gives rise to fragmentation, isolation, and diminished possibilities for collective action. Other chapters demonstrate how its structural dimensions may remain only partially visible to those

experiencing them. Elsewhere, writing itself emerges less as a vehicle of resistance than as a fragile form of witnessing and testimony, as in the migrant-worker texts examined in Chapter 11. Simply put, the chapters indicate that the relationship between literature and resistance is neither self-evident nor univocal. Like precarisation itself, resistance takes diverse and sometimes contradictory forms, shaped by the particular social, historical, and literary settings in which texts are produced and read.

In this sense, the volume approaches literature's critical or resistant potential as an empirical question, one that can only be addressed through close attention to specific literary situations (see Nilsson, 2025, pp. 10–11). What emerges from *Precarisation Across Literatures* is not a single overarching conclusion but a differentiated understanding of the multiple ways in which literature engages with precarisation: it may contribute to resistance, register its effects, reproduce its limitations, or expose the challenges of rendering resistance imaginable and expressible.

Towards a grammar of precarisation

The core aim of *Precarisation Across Literatures* is to explore a wide range of literary articulations of precarisation and thereby shed light on the diverse forms and manifestations of the phenomenon. This exploration not only highlights literature's capacity to render precarisation visible but also its potential to intervene in, resist, or even contest the processes that systematically intensify vulnerability and instability in contemporary life.

By bringing together analyses of literature from a wide range of national (and, in some cases, historical) contexts, the volume provides what we, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, call an "übersichtliche Darstellung" [perspicuous presentation] (Wittgenstein, 2001, §122). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that a synoptic view of the uses of a concept can help us overcome confusion about its meaning. As Toril Moi (2017, p. 50) observes, such a "grammatical investigation" functions as a form of "therapy for our own words." From this perspective, the question of what precarisation is cannot be answered by stipulative definition. Rather, the meaning of the concept emerges through its use and through the practices, situations, and experiences to which it is applied. *Precarisation Across Literatures* contributes to such clarification by assembling a series of exemplary literary situations. The individual chapters closely examine works that their

contributors have identified as depicting conditions of precarity or as shaped by processes of precarisation. Taken together, these analyses provide a perspicuous overview of the range of phenomena to which the concept may intelligibly refer.

By juxtaposing heterogeneous situations, the book does not seek to distil an abstract essence common to all cases. Rather, it aims to elucidate what, following Wittgenstein, might be understood as the *grammar* of precarisation: the shared criteria, distinctions, and relations that become intelligible when examining the different contexts in which the concept does explanatory work.

As noted above, the volume gives precedence to the notion of precarisation. In light of this Wittgensteinian perspective, however, it is important to emphasise that the outline presented here is not intended as a fixed definition against which the subsequent chapters are measured.

In sum, the volume traces the grammar of precarisation through the chapters' engagement with concrete literary situations to which, according to the authors, the concept of precarisation can meaningfully be applied. It is through attention to these varied uses that the phenomenon itself comes into view. In this sense, and in accordance with Wittgenstein's observation that "essence is expressed in grammar" (2001, §371), the volume approaches precarisation not as an object lying behind language, but as a set of social processes that are part of our life in language.

A brief return to Lundberg's *Yarden* may help illustrate the argument. The text presents the situation of a middle-aged, Swedish-born male poet performing manual labour under non-standard employment conditions in contemporary Sweden. Understanding this situation in terms of precarisation draws attention to the features that render such an application of the concept intelligible: the insecurity of the employment contract, the resulting exposure to vulnerability, and the erosion of social and personal recognition. It is through the articulation of these criteria, rather than through the imposition of a definition, that the concept of precarisation gains clarity. In this way, the reading makes possible a deeper understanding both of the particular situation depicted in the text and of the concept of precarisation itself.

Mapping the volume: Cartography and structure

Precarisation Across Literatures can be read in different ways and for different purposes. *First*, the collection of chapters presents and unfolds a wide range of

examples of primarily twenty-first century socially engaged literature. As such, the volume is an important contribution to the study of what has frequently been identified as a central trend in contemporary fiction, that is, the return of the social question in twenty-first-century literature. *Second*, by emphasising the contextual specificities of literary engagements with the global phenomenon of precarisation, the volume introduces new theoretical and analytical perspectives into ongoing discussions of literary and cultural responses to contemporary social and political challenges. *Third*, it contributes to broader academic and political discussions of precarisation. Consequently, the volume is addressed not only to readers, students, and scholars of literature, but also to anyone concerned with the pressing issue of growing socio-economic insecurity and vulnerability worldwide.

The chapters of *Precarisation Across Literatures* explore literature's engagement with precarisation in different parts of the world. As indicated, however, the volume does not provide a comprehensive or exhaustive literary atlas. Such an undertaking would in any case be too ambitious and would extend well beyond the scope of the research environment from which the volume has emerged. That said, there are nevertheless regrettable uncharted territories in the exemplary map. The volume exhibits a predominantly European bias, while analyses of precarisation in African and South American literatures are entirely absent. Furthermore, several significant geopolitical and cultural contexts, including Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and India, are not addressed.

Although not representative in any strict sense, *Precarisation Across Literatures* is arguably illustrative and, as such, lends support to the central argument that both precarisation and literature's relationship to it differ across contexts. The sometimes striking differences between the individual chapters, their empirical material, and the socio-political and historical conditions from which they emerge highlight the diversity of the phenomenon and the plurality of ways and forms through which precarisation is experienced, represented, and understood.

A further factor in the diversity of the chapters simply concerns the varied interests and competencies, as well as diverse temperaments, preferences, and styles of the contributing scholars, which are manifested in their differing methods, theoretical orientations, and analytical strategies. Consequently, the volume includes analyses that prioritise close readings of one or a few exemplary works alongside chapters that offer broader overviews of larger bodies of texts. Similarly, some contributions focus

on distinctive literary forms and formal devices, whereas others place greater emphasis on historically and contextually oriented modes of analysis. Finally, while the vast majority of the chapters engage with contemporary – that is, twenty-first-century – material, the volume also includes contributions that incorporate or focus on older texts.

In compiling the volume, we have sought to ensure overall coherence while facilitating dialogue and comparison between the chapters. However, just as the contributing scholars themselves have identified the materials they associate with precarisation and regard as most conducive to mapping its affective grammar, a further editorial principle has been to let each chapter adopt the modes of presentation and analysis best suited to its particular objects of study. The resulting pluralism is, we would argue, not a limitation but an aspect of the "perspicuous presentation" that this volume aims to provide. As such, the collected chapters also demonstrate the range of perspectives and lines of inquiry that precarisation, as an analytical lens, may foster and make possible.

Returning to the literary atlas, *Precarisation Across Literatures* emerges from the research environment *Precariat, Precarity, and Precariousness in (Post-)Welfare-State Scandinavian Literatures*. This origin is reflected in the structure of the volume. It is organised into three overarching sections forming a set of concentric circles, the *first* of which opens the volume's exploration of literary articulations of the grammar of precarisation with three chapters devoted respectively to Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. The *second* section broadens the scope to other European contexts, including Spain, Greece, and Germany. Finally, a *third* section, extending beyond Europe, with chapters on China, Singapore, and the United States, widens the outlook further and foregrounds the global but unevenly distributed nature of precarisation.

Earlier, we stressed that *Precarisation Across Literatures* can be read in different ways. The same applies to the present introduction. This should be understood quite literally. At this point, that is, with the purpose and framing of the volume now clarified, readers may proceed directly to the individual chapters. However, those interested in a more detailed presentation of the contributions, and thus of the volume's material as a whole, may instead continue to the final (optional) section below ("Chapters and cases"), which provides precisely that. Moreover, this overview lays the groundwork for identifying the criteria, distinctions, and relations that

emerge through an analysis of the grammar of precarisation. This framework is further developed in the volume's afterword, where insights generated across its chapters will be elaborated and discussed.

Chapters and cases (an optional closer look)

The common denominator of the three chapters devoted respectively to Denmark, Sweden, and Norway is their shared concern with the relationship between precarisation and the Nordic welfare state model, or social-democratic welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The often internationally praised societal model is characterised by its universal reach, aiming to secure "easy access to relatively generous welfare benefits" and labour markets "regulated to avoid employee exploitation" (Martela et al., 2020). The three chapters nevertheless nuance this picture by demonstrating how precarisation and its consequences in the form of heightened socio-economic insecurity and segregation have become recurrent themes in recent Nordic literature. At the same time, they show how Scandinavian welfare-state institutions and labour movements may still limit or counter processes of precarisation.

Chapter 1, "A Multi-Tool for Re-Opening the Social Question(s): The Concept of Precarity in/and Danish Literature," by Nicklas Freisleben Lund, offers a meta-historical account of how the concept of precarity has emerged, circulated, and been put to use in Danish literary discourse in recent years. Rather than providing a conventional literary-historical survey of texts depicting precarious lives, the chapter examines how literature and precarity have been discursively coupled in criticism and scholarship since the mid-2010s. In doing so, it shows that the relationship between literature and precarity is not given in advance but is continuously remodelled through interpretative practices and institutional contexts.

Starting from an influential intervention by literary scholars Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder in 2017, the analysis reconstructs a trajectory in which precarity becomes an increasingly prominent analytical framework for understanding contemporary Danish literature. It identifies several conditions that have facilitated this development, including rising socio-economic inequality, transformations of the welfare state, the re-politicisation of Danish literary culture, and the renewed salience of class as an interpretative category. At the same time, it demonstrates how the concept has been applied across a heterogeneous body of texts, often foregrounding

representations of marginalisation, insecurity, and social exclusion, while also raising questions about solidarity, difference, and the problem of speaking for the precarious.

A central aspect of the chapter is its critical examination of the conceptual vocabulary through which these developments have been understood. In particular, it highlights the instability and limited analytical precision of the notion of "the precariat," which, when applied to literary material, tends to become both overly inclusive and insufficiently differentiated. As an alternative, the chapter proposes a shift from identifying a putative social group to understanding precarisation as a multifaceted process that affects different social positions in uneven ways, an approach that resonates closely with the conceptual framework adopted in this volume and that will be developed further in several of the chapters that follow.

Finally, Lund shows that, despite its ambiguities, the concept of precarity has been productive in the Danish context. It has functioned as a catalyst for reintroducing questions of class, inequality, and social conflict into literary studies, thereby contributing to a renewed engagement with what might be termed the social question. At the same time, the chapter's reflexive perspective clarifies both the possibilities and the limitations of this conceptual framework and thus provides a strong point of departure for the comparative analyses that follow.

In Chapter 2, "Post-Swedish Model Writing: Precarisation and Political Imagination in Contemporary Literature," Magnus Nilsson shifts the geographical focus to Sweden. The chapter takes as its point of departure the observation that precarity has become an unexpectedly prominent theme in recent Swedish literature, despite the country's enduring association with relatively high levels of social security. It argues that this apparent paradox can be understood by examining how contemporary experiences of insecurity are interpreted against the background of the Swedish labour-market and welfare-state model and its perceived erosion.

Through readings of a range of literary works, including Lundberg's *Yarden*, the chapter shows that labour-market precarity is treated not only as a problem in its own right, but also as an index of broader historical transformations. In this sense, the texts under discussion tend to present precarious work as a metonym for the dismantling of the Swedish labour-market and welfare-state model, thereby linking individual experiences of insecurity to larger institutional shifts. At the same time,

these dynamics are mediated through diverse narrative forms and aesthetic strategies, which shape how precarisation becomes perceptible and meaningful.

A central dimension of the analysis concerns the temporal framing of precarisation. While many of the works juxtapose contemporary insecurity with a comparatively secure past – thus suggesting a narrative of decline – the chapter demonstrates that this contrast is often unsettled from within. Rather than presenting security and precarity as belonging to distinct historical phases, the texts foreground their coexistence and uneven distribution, emphasising the role of political decisions and institutional arrangements in producing such configurations. In doing so, the chapter establishes a line of inquiry that is further developed in later contributions, where the historical contingency of precarisation is explored across different contexts.

Finally, the chapter addresses the political implications of these representations. It shows that contemporary Swedish literature does not merely diagnose processes of precarisation, but also engages with questions of agency, solidarity, and collective response. In this respect, references to the labour movement and earlier struggles for social rights serve as resources for rethinking present conditions. The chapter thus demonstrates how precarisation acquires meaning within a specific welfare-state context and how literature mediates between experiences of the present, interpretations of the past, and projections of possible futures.

The final contribution to the Scandinavian section, "Precaritised Children in the Norwegian Welfare State," by Hamm and Mathisen, turns to the Norwegian context and examines literary representations of precarisation from the perspective of children and young adults. As in the preceding chapter, the analysis begins from an apparent paradox: such representations emerge in a society widely perceived as one of the most robust welfare states. The authors argue that this paradox is closely linked to a public discourse in which poverty and socio-economic insecurity tend to remain underarticulated or denied.

Through analyses of works by several prominent authors, the chapter shows how contemporary Norwegian literature insists on making visible forms of precarisation affecting families on the margins of the welfare state. Unlike the Swedish texts discussed in Chapter 2, where precarisation is often framed in relation to historical transformation at a societal level, the works examined here foreground its everyday and relational dimensions. Precariousness appears not primarily as an individual

condition, but as an intergenerational process in which children's lives are shaped by their parents' unstable positions in the labour market.

A central focus of the chapter is the ambivalent role of welfare-state institutions. While these institutions provide forms of support, they are also portrayed as insufficient and, at times, as sources of anxiety and control. Figures such as teachers and representatives of the Child Welfare Services in particular are experienced as threatening, thereby complicating the image of the welfare state as a consistently protective framework. In this respect, the chapter nuances the account developed in Chapter 2 by showing that precarisation becomes visible not only through narratives of decline, but also through the contradictions and limitations of still-functioning welfare arrangements.

By foregrounding children's perspectives, the analysis also highlights a broader shift in Scandinavian literature about class: from a primary focus on labour and production to questions of social reproduction, care, and institutional mediation. This shift expands the conceptual scope of precarisation, demonstrating how it affects not only working life, but also family relations, subject formation, and the conditions for becoming a secure social subject. The chapter thus shows how literature can render precarisation visible in contexts where it often remains obscured, while also illuminating its lived and relational consequences within the framework of the welfare state.

The volume's second section broadens the scope to other European contexts. In Chapter 4, "Precariousness, Precarity, and Precarisation in Contemporary Flemish Literature: Negotiating the Global and Local in Poetry (Geert van Istendael), Prose (Christophe Van Gerrewey), and Theatre (Stijn Devillé)," Michiel Rys examines how literary representations of precarisation emerge at the intersection of local socio-economic conditions and transnational dynamics. Building on the contextual sensitivity developed in the Scandinavian chapters, the analysis emphasises that precarisation, while global in scope, is always articulated within specific cultural and institutional frameworks.

Through readings of texts across poetry, prose, and drama, the chapter shows how literary works register both the structural forces associated with global capitalism and the particularities of their local manifestations. In doing so, they stage tensions between generalised moral responses to insecurity – such as solidarity and care – and

the specific socio-economic conditions in which precarious lives are embedded. This dual orientation not only echoes the comparative perspective developed in earlier chapters but sharpens it by foregrounding the interplay between universalising dynamics and context-bound articulations of precarisation.

A central focus of the chapter is what may be described as the moral and affective responses to precarisation. Rather than merely depicting socio-economic conditions, the texts explore how insecurity is experienced, interpreted, and communicated, thereby contributing to the cultural semantics through which precarisation becomes intelligible. Literature thus appears not only as a medium of representation, but as a site in which the meanings of precarisation are actively negotiated. At the same time, the chapter examines how literary texts engage with the question of collective response. By staging encounters between different social groups, they reveal both the possibilities and the limits of transforming shared vulnerability into forms of solidarity – an issue that is taken up, in a more historically grounded form, in the following chapter. In this way, the chapter demonstrates how precarisation is mediated through the interaction between global processes and local contexts, while also foregrounding the ethical and affective dimensions through which it is perceived and articulated.

Chapter 5 – Christoph Schaub's "Precarization, Literary Practice, and Solidarity in 1970s West Germany: Working-Class Women in Marianne Herzog's Reportage *Von der Hand in den Mund* and Vera Kamenko's Autobiography *Unter uns war Krieg*" – extends the volume's perspective both geographically and historically by turning to the literary articulation of precarisation in postwar West Germany. In contrast to the predominantly contemporary focus of the preceding chapters, the contribution situates precarisation within the broader transformations of global capitalism in the 1970s, thereby extending the temporal horizon of the volume.

Focusing on Marianne Herzog's (b. 1939) montage-style reportage *Von der Hand in den Mund* [From Hand to Mouth] and Vera Kamenko's (b. 1947) autobiographical narrative *Unter uns war Krieg* [There Was War Among Us], the chapter shows how precarious labour conditions are represented as structurally embedded and socially differentiated. In particular, it foregrounds the systematic exploitation of working-class women, demonstrating how precarisation operates through the intersection of gender, class, and migration. In this respect, the analysis resonates with the emphasis

on uneven distribution developed in earlier chapters, while grounding this insight more explicitly in the historical dynamics of labour and political struggle.

At the same time, the chapter places strong emphasis on the relationship between literary representation and the conditions of its production. Herzog's work explicitly connects factory labour with the author's own position as a writer, thereby situating literary practice within broader structures of precarious work. This reflexive dimension complements the concerns raised in Chapter 4 by showing that literature not only mediates precarisation but is itself embedded in the conditions it seeks to articulate. The chapter also examines how these texts engage with questions of solidarity and resistance. By situating them within the contexts of second-wave feminism and the labour movement, it demonstrates how literary practice can become part of a political response to precarisation. In this respect, the analysis provides a historically grounded counterpart to the more tentative and ambivalent forms of solidarity explored elsewhere in the volume.

The chapter demonstrates that precarisation is neither exclusively contemporary nor uniform, but deeply embedded in the historical development of capitalism, while also highlighting how literary practice can participate in collective forms of agency and critique.

In Chapter 6, Christian Claesson's "Precarity and Middleclassness in Spanish Postcrisis Fiction," the focus shifts to Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Whereas the preceding chapters have emphasised precarisation in relation to structural inequality and labour struggles, this contribution turns to a literary field in which it is articulated from within a predominantly middle-class horizon. It foregrounds a perspective in which insecurity emerges less from long-standing marginalisation than from the destabilisation of relatively secure social positions – a pattern that also resonates with several of the Scandinavian chapters, where precarisation is framed against the erosion of welfare-state stability.

Focusing on Javier López Menacho's (b. 1982) *Yo, precario* [I, Precarious] (2013), the chapter situates contemporary literary responses to precarisation within a broader socio-historical trajectory, including the expansion of the Spanish middle class in the late twentieth century, its subsequent crisis, and the emergence of political movements such as 15M. At the same time, it shows that these representations are marked by a constitutive ambivalence. While, as in the Flemish material discussed

in Chapter 4, they register moral and affective responses to insecurity, they tend to frame precarisation less as a structural feature of capitalism than as a failure of meritocratic expectations. In this respect, they foreground the gap between expectations and lived realities rather than the systemic mechanisms that produce such disparities.

A further dimension concerns the role of cultural capital in mediating precarious situations. In *Yo, precario*, the protagonist's educational background and narrative self-fashioning provide a means of interpreting – and to some extent mitigating – his condition. At the same time, this highlights an important limitation: as in some of the cases discussed in Chapter 4, the capacity to articulate precarious experience is itself unevenly distributed. The literary visibility of precarity is therefore closely tied to those who possess the resources to narrate it, while forms of insecurity affecting less privileged groups remain comparatively underrepresented.

The chapter thus highlights how experiences of precarisation are shaped not only by national and historical contexts, but also by the social positions from which they are articulated. By foregrounding the middle-class perspective that structures much of Spanish post-crisis fiction, it complements the analyses in other chapters of marginalisation, labour, and solidarity – which focus mainly on working-class people and people living in poverty – and underscores the unequal distribution of voice, experience, and interpretative authority in literary engagements with precarisation.

The following chapter, "Narrating Precarity: Giorgio Falco's *Hypothesis of a Defeat*," addresses the Italian context, examining literary representations of precarisation in the transition from Fordist stability to post-Fordist labour regimes. Focusing on Giorgio Falco's (b. 1967) *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* (2017), Camilla Skalle analyses an explicitly autobiographical and documentary mode of writing that foregrounds precarisation both as a socio-economic condition and as a lived, embodied experience. In doing so, the chapter develops concerns already present in earlier contributions where precarity is framed against the erosion of historically specific forms of stability, while placing greater emphasis on the intimate and experiential dimensions of this transformation.

Through a close reading of Falco's autofictional narrative, the analysis shows how precarisation is articulated as a process that reshapes not only work but subjectivity itself. The text juxtaposes the protagonist's fragmented and insecure working life

with the stable Fordist employment of the previous generation, thereby rendering a broader historical shift perceptible.

Particular attention is paid to literary form. Combining documentary elements, anti-rhetorical language, and an episodic structure, Falco's narrative blurs the boundaries between autobiography and social analysis, positioning the author as a "document" of neoliberal labour culture. This reflexive strategy resonates with the emphasis in Chapter 5 on the entanglement of literary production and precarious labour, while also aligning with Chapter 4's view of literature as a site where the meanings and grammars of precarisation are articulated and negotiated.

At the same time, the analysis underscores the dual character of precarisation as both material and existential. Like the Spanish material discussed in Chapter 6, Falco's narrative registers affective responses such as humiliation and dispossession; however, it places stronger emphasis on the systemic and pervasive nature of these experiences, linking them more directly to structural transformations of work and society. In this way, it helps bridge the gap between approaches centred on subjective experience and those foregrounding broader socio-economic processes.

The chapter also addresses literature's role as a form of testimony and resistance. Although Falco's text does not articulate a clear programme of collective action, writing itself emerges as a means of documenting and contesting precarisation. It thus offers a distinctive perspective within the volume, situated between the more explicitly collective forms of resistance explored in Chapter 5 and the more tentative, affectively mediated forms of solidarity analysed in Chapter 4.

The chapter demonstrates how precarisation can be understood simultaneously as a historically grounded and deeply personal process, and shows how literary form enables the articulation of its economic, affective, and existential dimensions within the context of post-Fordist capitalism.

The next chapter, Anastasia Natsina's "The Call for a Community: Summoning the Precariat in Contemporary Greek Literature," focuses on Greek literature in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008–2018, examining representations of precarisation in a context marked by profound economic collapse and social fragmentation. Whereas earlier contributions – particularly Chapters 2, 6, and 7 – have approached precarisation as a historically perceived shift from relative stability to insecurity, this analysis focuses on a setting in which such processes have become acute, widespread,

and socially defining. It thus highlights how literature responds not only by depicting precarious conditions, but by actively engaging with their social and affective consequences.

Through readings of works by several contemporary Greek authors, the chapter shows how "crisis literature" renders visible the multiple effects of precarisation, including poverty, unemployment, fear, shame, and social isolation. As in the Norwegian material discussed in Chapter 3, precarisation permeates everyday life and social relations. In contrast to that context, however, it is not framed as a marginal condition within an otherwise functioning welfare state, but as a pervasive and collective experience that cuts across social strata. The Greek case thereby intensifies dynamics observed elsewhere in the volume by presenting precarisation as a more-or-less generalised condition.

Particular attention is given to narrative form and readerly engagement. While Chapters 4 and 7 emphasise literature's role in articulating the moral, affective, and experiential consequences of precarisation, this contribution further analyses how specific aesthetic strategies – such as interconnected short-story forms, composite narratives, defamiliarising perspectives, and metafictional techniques – mobilise readers as participants in the interpretative process. These strategies produce what, following Connell (2021), is described as a mode of "anxious reading," in which the fragmentation and instability of precarious life are mirrored in the experience of the text itself.

At the same time, the analysis foregrounds a central tension between fragmentation and community. While the texts depict individuals marked by isolation and vulnerability, they also gesture toward forms of connection that might counteract these conditions. In this respect, the chapter resonates with the emphasis on solidarity explored in Chapter 5 but recasts it in more affectively mediated terms: rather than emerging from organised political movements, community appears as a tentative and emergent possibility grounded in shared vulnerability.

A key argument is that these texts do not merely represent precarisation but perform a "summoning" of community. By highlighting family resemblances across social differences and staging moments of care and recognition, they invite both characters and readers to conceive of precarious subjects as potential members of a collective. This perspective complements the Flemish and Spanish cases discussed in Chapters

4 and 6, further demonstrating how the meanings of precarisation are shaped not only by socio-economic conditions, but also by the narrative and affective forms through which they are mediated.

The chapter shows how literature can respond to extreme conditions of precarisation by transforming experiences of fragmentation into possibilities for collective identification, and emphasises the role of aesthetic form in mediating between individual vulnerability and imagined community.

Chapter 9, "Perceptions of Precarity in Sofi Oksanen's *Dog Park* (*Koirapuisto*)" by Torben Jelsbak, concludes the volume's second section by turning to an Eastern European and post-Soviet context. It foregrounds how precarisation is shaped by specific historical and geopolitical conditions. In contrast to the Scandinavian cases discussed in Section 1, where precarisation is often framed in relation to the erosion of welfare-state stability, this contribution examines a setting marked by the long-term consequences of systemic transformation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It thereby extends the comparative perspective of the volume by situating precarisation within global circuits of labour, migration, and exploitation.

At the centre of the analysis is Oksanen's (b. 1977) exploration of reproductive labour and bioeconomic exploitation, particularly in relation to transnational surrogacy markets. Through its depiction of Ukrainian women navigating conditions of economic insecurity and limited opportunities, *Dog Park* presents precarisation as embedded in global inequalities that intersect with gender, class, and geopolitical position. In this respect, the chapter rearticulates themes present elsewhere in the volume within a more explicitly transnational framework.

A key focus is the novel's narrative structure and its treatment of perception and knowledge. Oksanen's use of shifting perspectives and fragmented temporality foregrounds the difficulty of fully grasping precarious conditions, both for characters and for readers. This emphasis resonates with the attention to affective and interpretative processes in Chapters 4 and 8, while placing greater weight on uncertainty, opacity, and the uneven distribution of knowledge within precarious systems.

The analysis further shows how *Dog Park* situates individual experiences of insecurity within broader networks of power and exploitation. By tracing connections to global

markets and cross-border movements, the novel reveals how such networks reproduce and intensify asymmetries between regions and social groups.

Unlike the Greek material discussed in Chapter 8, where literature is shown to gesture towards forms of community and shared response, *Dog Park* offers a more ambivalent and often pessimistic vision. Although moments of connection are present, they are frequently undermined by competition, mistrust, and structural constraints. This perspective introduces a counterpoint within the volume, emphasising the limits of collective agency under conditions of intensified global precarisation. The chapter demonstrates how precarisation must be understood in relation to specific geopolitical configurations and transnational structures of power, and shows how literary form can render visible the complex, often opaque dynamics that shape precarious lives in a globalised world.

The third and final section of *Precarisation Across Literatures* turns to contexts beyond Europe, foregrounding the global and unevenly distributed nature of precarisation. Its opening chapter – Gaia Perini and Federico Picerni's "Writing the Memory of Labour Precarisation in China: The Case of the Dongbei Renaissance" – examines how precarisation is articulated in the context of post-socialist economic transformation. It traces how the large-scale restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises since the 1990s have produced enduring forms of socio-economic insecurity. In contrast to many of the European cases discussed earlier, where precarisation is often framed as the erosion of relatively stable welfare arrangements, this contribution focuses on a more radical systemic shift: the transition from state socialism to market-driven capitalism.

A central focus is the intergenerational dimension of precarisation. Contemporary Chinese literature is shown to give voice both to former industrial workers displaced by economic restructuring and to their children, whose lives are shaped by diminished stability and limited prospects. This perspective resonates with the intergenerational analyses developed in earlier chapters, particularly Skalle's discussion in Chapter 7 of Falco, while situating these dynamics within a markedly different political and historical framework. Precarisation thus appears not only as a present condition, but as a legacy that structures life trajectories across generations.

The analysis also highlights the role of memory in mediating these experiences. As in the Swedish and Italian materials discussed by Nilsson and Skalle in Chapters 2

and 7, the texts construct contrasts between past and present conditions. Here, however, the nature of this contrast is fundamentally different. Rather than juxtaposing contemporary insecurity with partial forms of protection, the Chinese material foregrounds the collapse of a system that once guaranteed employment and social security as foundational aspects of everyday life. Precarisation is therefore articulated not simply as an intensification of insecurity, but as a profound reconfiguration of social relations.

Attention to literary form further develops this perspective. Narrative strategies such as restrained realism, detailed depictions of everyday life, and the incorporation of intergenerational memory enable these works to articulate the affective and social consequences of economic transformation. In this respect, the chapter complements earlier analyses by showing how literary representations of precarisation are shaped not only by socio-economic processes but also by specific aesthetic traditions and narrative practices.

Finally, the texts discussed foreground the problem of collective experience and its representation. While they evoke shared histories of loss and marginalisation, they often emphasise the fragmentation of social life and the difficulty of articulating common perspectives. In contrast to the Greek material discussed by Natsina in Chapter 8, where literature is shown to "summon" forms of community, the Chinese case underscores the persistence of dislocation and the limits of collective agency under conditions of rapid structural change. The chapter demonstrates how precarisation is shaped by large-scale transformations in political economy, and shows how literature can register their long-term social and affective consequences across generations.

The following chapter – Luka Lei Zhang's "The Precarious Diary: Form, Risk, and Resistance in Md Sharif Uddin's Writings" – examines literary articulations of precarisation in the context of migrant labour in Singapore. By focusing on texts produced under conditions of transnational labour migration, the analysis shifts attention from nationally embedded welfare regimes and post-socialist transformations to a setting in which precarisation is structured by global labour markets, legal regimes, and highly asymmetrical power relations. Together with Chapter 9, it foregrounds the explicitly transnational dimensions of precarisation.

At the centre of the analysis are writings by migrant workers, approached not only as representations of precarious conditions but as practices emerging from within them. Unlike many of the texts discussed elsewhere in the volume, where precarisation is mediated through relatively established literary institutions, these writings are produced under conditions of extreme vulnerability and limited access to cultural capital. This perspective sharpens a key question raised throughout the volume: who is able to speak about precarisation, and under what circumstances.

Particular attention is given to the diary as a literary form. The diary captures precarisation as an ongoing and processual experience, structured by the rhythms of everyday life under conditions of insecurity, surveillance, and dependence. In this respect, the analysis resonates with the episodic and autobiographical forms discussed in Chapter 7, while intensifying their implications: fragmentation here is not only an aesthetic strategy, but a reflection of lived conditions. The diary thus functions as a means of documenting precarisation from within, rather than representing it from an external or retrospective perspective.

The texts are also understood as operating simultaneously as testimony and intervention. Like the Greek material discussed in Chapter 8, they make visible experiences that might otherwise remain marginal or invisible; however, the conditions under which they are produced significantly constrain possibilities for collective organisation. Writing therefore assumes a particularly important role as a space for articulating experience and asserting presence where other forms of agency are limited.

A further dimension concerns the explicitly transnational character of precarisation in this context. While earlier chapters have explored the interaction between global processes and local conditions, the Singaporean case shows how precarisation is directly constituted through cross-border labour systems, migration regimes, and economic dependencies. This highlights the unequal global distribution not only of insecurity, but also of the capacity to narrate and circulate accounts of it.

The chapter demonstrates how precarisation takes particularly acute forms in contexts of migrant labour and legal vulnerability, while also showing how literary practices under such conditions both document and contest these realities. It thereby foregrounds the relationship between voice, visibility, and structural inequality in a globalised world.

The final chapter of the section – Joseph B. Entin's "'A Work of Myriad Communications': Precarious Labor, Asian Migration, and Literary Form in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2006) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)" – turns to the United States, examining literary representations of precarisation in relation to migration, race, and globalised labour. The study explores how precarisation is articulated in a context often regarded as paradigmatic of advanced capitalism. In doing so, it brings into focus dynamics that recur throughout the volume while reconfiguring them through the specific historical and cultural conditions of the United States.

A central concern is the intersection of precarisation and migrant experience. As in the Singaporean material discussed in Chapter 11, these texts highlight the vulnerability of transnational subjects navigating unstable labour markets and precarious legal and social positions. At the same time, they situate these experiences within a broader framework of racialised inequality and cultural dislocation. This perspective extends earlier analyses of transnational precarisation by showing how global labour dynamics are mediated through historically specific structures of power, belonging, and exclusion.

Attention is also given to literary form. Narrative strategies characterised by fragmentation, multiplicity, and intertextuality reflect the instability of precarious lives, while tying these formal features more explicitly to experiences of cultural and linguistic displacement. Writing emerges not only as a means of representing precarisation but as a space in which different modes of communication, identity, and memory intersect and are negotiated.

The analysis further engages with questions of agency and relationality. While precarisation is frequently associated with isolation and marginalisation, the texts also foreground forms of connection across families, communities, and transnational networks. These connections complicate any simple opposition between individual vulnerability and collective solidarity, offering a more nuanced perspective than both the more explicitly "summoning" function described in Chapter 8 and the more sceptical accounts of solidarity in Chapters 9 and 10.

The chapter shows how precarisation operates at the intersection of labour, migration, and cultural identity, and how contemporary U.S. literature articulates

these processes through formally complex and thematically layered narratives. It thus brings into view both the global reach and the contextual specificity of precarisation.

The chapters in the first section deal with descriptions of precarisation in societies historically associated with strong welfare-state institutions. They show that precarisation is not only a matter of objectively worsening conditions, but also of historically shaped expectations: in Denmark and Sweden, it often appears as a perceived departure from established norms of stability and equality, while in Norway it becomes visible precisely through its partial denial in public discourse. Across these contexts, literature plays a key role in mediating this tension between appearance and experience.

At the same time, the section establishes several conceptual foundations for the volume as a whole. It foregrounds precarisation as a process, emphasises its uneven distribution across social groups, and highlights the importance of representation and perspective – that is, who is able to narrate precarious lives and under what conditions. By moving between meta-critical analysis (Chapter 1), historically oriented readings (Chapter 2), and relational and intergenerational perspectives (Chapter 3), the section offers a first articulation of the *grammar* of precarisation: a set of recurring patterns and distinctions through which the phenomenon becomes recognisable across different contexts.

The second section broadens the analytical scope by demonstrating how precarisation is differently configured across European contexts shaped by distinct political, economic, and historical trajectories. One of its key contributions lies in showing that precarisation cannot be understood as a uniform phenomenon, even within relatively comparable welfare and labour-market regimes. Instead, the chapters map a range of configurations: as a tension between global forces and local conditions (Rys's analysis of Flemish literature in Chapter 4), as a historically embedded feature of labour struggles (Schaub's discussion of West-German literature in Chapter 5), as a middle-class crisis of expectations (Claesson's analysis in Chapter 6 of Spanish literature), as an embodied and existential condition (see Chapter 7, where Skalle analyses Italian literature), as a collective social catastrophe (as highlighted in Natsina's discussion of Greek literature in Chapter 8), and as a geopolitically structured form of exploitation (see Jelsbak's analysis of Sofi Oksanen's *Dog Park* in Chapter 9).

The section also develops the volume's attention to literary form and mediation. Across the chapters, precarisation is articulated not only through thematic content but through specific aesthetic strategies, ranging from autofiction and montage to short-story cycles and complex narrative structures, that shape how insecurity is perceived, experienced, and interpreted.

Finally, the section highlights tensions between fragmentation and solidarity. While some texts gesture toward collective responses, others emphasise the divisive and isolating effects of precarisation. What emerges is a differentiated picture: precarisation generates both possibilities for connection and conditions that constrain or undermine collective action. In this respect, the section deepens the comparative framework of the volume by clarifying how these dynamics vary across contexts.

The third section extends the analysis beyond Europe by highlighting the fundamentally global and unevenly distributed nature of precarisation. By examining contexts such as post-socialist China, Singapore, and the United States, it shows how precarisation is shaped by large-scale transformations in political economy, global labour markets, and migration regimes.

A central outcome of these chapters is the recognition that precarisation cannot be understood solely as a condition affecting individuals or national populations but must be analysed as a transnationally produced and structured phenomenon embedded in global inequalities. The Chinese case foregrounds long-term structural transformation and intergenerational change; the Singaporean case highlights extreme forms of labour and legal vulnerability; and the American case explores how precarisation intersects with migration and race. Together, these analyses demonstrate not only the variability of precarisation across contexts, but also the profound asymmetries regarding its distribution in terms of power, security, and voice.

The section also sharpens the volume's attention to the relationship between precarisation and literary production itself. In several of the contexts examined, writing emerges under precarious conditions and becomes a crucial means of documentation, testimony, and intervention. Literature thus appears not only as a medium for representing precarisation, but as a practice that is itself entangled in the processes it seeks to articulate.

The chapters outlined above provide a first outline of the grammar of precarisation that is further developed in the afterword, where the insights generated across the volume are brought into systematic relation.

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Chapter 1.

A Multi-Tool for Re-Opening the Social Question(s):

The Concept of Precarity in/and Danish Literature

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On 17 June 2017, "Prekariatet og litteraturens nytte" [The Precariat and the Usefulness of Literature] was published in the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen.*[1] The essay, authored by literary scholars Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder, constitutes an early example of the application to Danish literary debate of the "multi-stranded concept, associated with the set of terms including precarious, precariousness, precaritisation, and 'the' precariat" (Kasmir, 2018).[2]

The present chapter traces the trajectory of which "Prekariatet og litteraturens nytte" forms part and in which it constitutes a prominent early marker. More specifically, it examines the scholarly and critical couplings of precarity and Danish literature in order to outline the uses of the concept within literary discourse.

As the publication date of the essay suggests, the narrative reconstructed here is a recent one. It is also somewhat limited, as the Danish literary field constitutes a comparatively small arena in which literature, scholarship, and criticism furthermore

[1] All translations of non-English quotations are my own.

[2] This chapter was developed within the research project "Precariat, Precarity and Precariousness in (Post-)Welfare-State Scandinavian Literatures" funded by the Swedish Research Council (project ID: 2022-01839_VR). In addition to the sources cited, I have benefited from informal correspondence with Peter Simonsen, Mathies Græsborg Aarhus, Nikolaj Zeuthen, Johanne Gormsen Schmidt, and Jakob Søndergaard. A big thanks to all of them.

remain closely interconnected. And it is precisely the relatively limited corpus that makes the kind of meta-historical analysis pursued here possible and manageable, just as the scale allows patterns of conceptual circulation, appropriation, and institutionalization to emerge clearly.

Clarifications

Before the actual mapping, however, three preliminary clarifications must first be made.

The first concerns terminology. Precariat, precarity, precariousness – and numerous related derivatives – today constitute a frequently used yet conceptually diffuse umbrella terminology (see e.g. Kasmir, 2018; Choonara, Murgia, and Carmo, 2022). To some extent, this also characterizes their use within the Danish literary sphere. In this chapter, *precarity/the concept of precarity* therefore serves as a comprehensive term designating the varied applications of the broader set of related concepts.

The second clarification anticipates a potential criticism of the chapter's focus on scholarly and critical debate. My response relates directly to the conceptual ambiguity of precarity itself. Accordingly, writing a more conventional "Danish literary history of precarity" would require a prior definitional delimitation, marginalizing at least some of the texts, phenomena, and analytical foci that have hitherto been associated with the concept. Following Magnus Nilsson's work on working-class literature, the chapter proceeds from the premise that the relationship between literature and precarity should be understood as continually constructed rather than as being reified into an essentialist category (Nilsson, 2017, p. 96). Therefore, any account of precarity in/and Danish literature must include a consideration of how this relationship has been established. This is not to suggest that "literature about precarity" is merely a discursive phenomenon. The works associated with the concept in Danish literary discourse do share a – admittedly broad and diffuse – range of characteristics. Moreover, some texts explicitly invoke the terminology. For most of the examples discussed in this chapter, however, the association has been attributed by literary stakeholders rather than by the texts

themselves.[3] The simple point is that a given text's association with precarity does not depend upon its intentional engagement with the concept.

A final remark concerns the chapter's expository approach. Despite its implicit fascination with numbers and networks, the chapter presents no charts or graphs. Instead, it offers an interpretative account of its findings, taking the aforementioned 2017 essay as its point of departure, which comes to serve as a recurring reference point throughout the chapter.

Meet the precariat

"Prekariatet og litteraturens nytte" is, as already mentioned, authored by Peter Simonsen and Jon Helt Haarder, both affiliated with the University of Southern Denmark's Centre for Uses of Literature (UoL). Between 2016 and 2021, the centre was co-directed by Rita Felski, whose influential work informs the essay's central claim concerning the social "usefulness of literature." Simonsen and Haarder thus argue that fiction constitutes an important "source of insight, compassion, and recognition" (see Felski, 2008).

One such insight concerns "the class differences that still exist even in a country like Denmark." More specifically, the authors point to the "growing groups [...] falling completely out of society," often subsumed under the label of the "underclass." Yet they reject this term as too simplistic and insufficiently dynamic to capture the realities of contemporary class society. Instead, they propose a different concept: *meet the precariat*.

In other words, the essay introduces Guy Standing's *The Precariat* (2011; Danish translation 2017), placing particular emphasis on its analysis of "possible connections in society across traditional class divides." According to Simonsen and Haarder, "highly educated short-term employees, unemployed unskilled labourers, refugees and migrants have more in common than they have traditionally had,

[3] A curious example is Nikolaj Zeuthen's *Buemundet guitarfisk* [Bowmouth Guitarfish] (2018), which bears the subtitle "A Precarious Comedy." For this reason, "Privileged Precarity and Precarious Class Solidarity" (2020) identified it as one of the first Danish literary works to "actively appropriate" the concept (Lund, 2020a, p. 11). Yet Zeuthen was unfamiliar with the term while writing the novel; the subtitle was in fact suggested by his editor.

namely a pervasive insecurity in relation to permanent work and thus to notions of who they are."

The gateway into Danish literature is Kristian Bang Foss's column "Dagbog fra en moderne daglejer" [Diary of a Modern Day Labourer] (2016), in which he expresses his frustration with the financial insecurity of his profession. Foss is presented as sharing the experience of precarity with the precariat: "To live precariously is to live without control over your own life, to be exposed and at the mercy of others." This apparent equivalence is, however, immediately called into question due to the obvious differences between a "renowned author" with access to the media and, for instance, a "casual cleaner."

The tension between similarity-and-difference remains central as the essay turns to Kristian Bang Foss's novel *Døden kører Audi* [Death Drives an Audi] (2012). Having enjoyed a successful career in advertising, the novel's narrator, Asger, is dismissed and begins a gradual descent down the socio-economic ladder. As a result, he takes a job as a caregiver for the severely disabled Waldemar and thus joins the ranks of the public care sector's army of low-paid and low-status "warm hands."

Yet the arrangement develops into an unlikely friendship between "two precarious lives that have almost nothing in common except that they are vulnerable and at the mercy of others." At the same time, the essay argues, Foss subtly emphasizes a fundamental asymmetry in their relationship: "The lower-class Waldemar's unfortunate circumstances are something that Asger, from the upper class, exploits to get paid [...] and to write the novel about the situation that the reader is left with."

A similar conflict is portrayed in Helle Helle's novel *Ned til hundene* [Down to the Dogs] (2008), in which a writer undergoing marital crisis leaves her home and, by chance, is taken in by a rural community of characters who have "fallen out of the traditional working class." For the latter, this encounter ultimately has quietly disastrous consequences, whereas the comparatively less vulnerable writer returns to her well-off husband.

Due to these characteristics, the essay states, both novels highlight two challenges facing the precariat. First, they reveal the difficulty of creating solidarity across different fractions of this emerging class. Second, they demonstrate how being precarious "also entails that others speak on your behalf – be it social workers,

politicians, writers or a couple of literary scholars." This raises the following question: "But can the precariat not tell its own stories?"

The essay's answer is *yes*. And its examples include Yahya Hassan's self-titled poetry debut (2013), Morten Pape's novel *Planen* [The Plan] (2015), and Karina Pedersen's testimonial account *Helt ude i hampen* [Completely out of Touch] (2016). Although these three works differ significantly in genre, style, and political outlook, they all convey experiences of growing up in the "ghetto." The controversial term – officially endorsed in Denmark until recently – designates social housing areas often characterized by disproportionately high numbers of migrants, unemployed residents, welfare recipients, and other socially marginalized groups.[4]

The Danish "ghetto" debate has often centred on issues of immigration and integration. Simonsen and Haarder argue, however, that reading the works of Hassan, Pape, and Pedersen through the lens of Standing's theory invites a reconsideration of the dominant ethnic and cultural perspective, which tends to obscure the conditions shared by "the newcomers, their anti-immigrant opponents from the dying working class and freelance writers critical of society."

In conclusion, the essay underlines that fiction is "full of social usability" because of its capacity to engage readers in all kinds of worldly "hassle and equations that won't add up." These qualities are precisely what the works examined in this essay are said to possess:

> [Literature about the precariat] cannot create the solidarity across class differences that we so desperately need. But it can show us with rifle-like precision how different we are and the often absurd, unnecessary and tragic consequences those differences have for our prospects of living together.

[4] Since the 1990s, the term *ghetto* has appeared in official documents such as government reports, legislative proposals, and statutes, where it has functioned as a synonym for *deprived neighbourhoods*, *vulnerable residential areas*, and *parallel societies* (see e.g. Regeringen, 2018). In 2019, however, the Minister for Housing, Kaare Dybvad Bek, announced an end to the ministerial use of the term, arguing that it stigmatized residents of these areas (dr.dk, 2019).

Unravelling a patchwork backdrop

Why did the concept of precarity enter Danish literary debate at this particular moment? Such a question can never be answered definitively, but it is possible to identify a number of contributing factors.

A *first* factor is the rise in economic inequality during the twenty-first century (see e.g. AE, 2025; Larsen, 2023; Olsen et al., 2021; 2012). In political and academic debates, this development has often been linked to the ongoing transformation of the welfare state into a competition state. In Denmark, this concept is particularly associated with the work of political scientist Ove Kaj Pedersen, whose research has recently been summarized as follows:

> Pedersen has argued that the institutions of welfare, originally legitimized by reference to notions of social dignity and equal life opportunities for all, have not disappeared, nor have they simply been slimmed down, but rather have changed rationale over the past forty years. While originally intended to protect citizens from the economic logic of market forces [...] they are increasingly conceived as instruments whose goal is to optimize the productivity of the population. (Nexø, 2025, p. 42)

An emblematic example is the 2010 reform, which reduced the maximum period of entitlement to unemployment benefits from four to two years and likewise tightened the requirements for requalification. While the reform was intended to encourage labour market participation, it has been criticized for increasing the risk of marginalization among the most vulnerable groups (see e.g. Olsen, 2018, p. 23).

This development contrasts with the widespread image of Denmark's welfare-state model as a system that promotes equality and social security. Thus, it has been debated whether a Danish precariat actually exists (see e.g. Baumann 2018; Laurberg 2019).[5] If the focus is restricted to precarious forms of employment, however, the report *Non-standard Work in the Nordics* notes that, in Denmark, "nearly one in three employees can be classified as non-standard," most of whom are young people,

[5] Central to this debate is the Danish "flexicurity" model. Designed to combine labour-market flexibility with social security, it allows employers relatively easy hiring and dismissal practices while providing employees with comparatively generous social benefits. The Danish Trade Union Confederation (FH), however, has questioned the extent to which the model continues to deliver on its promise of security. According to the organization, the gross replacement rate of unemployment benefits for average wage earners has declined from 57 per cent in 1994 to 48 per cent in 2020 (FH, 2018; 2020).

women, migrants, and low-skilled workers (Ilsøe & Larsen, 2021, p. 83). Although some actively choose to work fewer hours or on temporary contracts, the report concludes that the labour market is undergoing changes that call for initiatives aimed at improving "security for non-standard workers" (Ilsøe & Larsen, 2021, p. 218).

Still, the considerable attention devoted to the concept may appear somewhat counterintuitive, given that the extent and intensity of precarity remain relatively limited in Denmark compared to many other countries. This situation must, however, be understood against the backdrop of Denmark's distinctive welfare-state legacy, which may have fostered exceptionally high expectations of social security and welfare provision. As a result, even relatively modest developments that undermine these expectations can be perceived as significant breaches of the social contract.

This is linked to a *second* factor: the so-called repoliticisation of twenty-first-century fiction (see e.g. Bendsen, 2014; Mønster, 2019; Friis, 2021). An illustrative example is Olga Ravn's 2014 essay "Sorry Mallarmé," which rejects the ideal of *l'art pour l'art* in an era marked by multiple crises: "I cannot refrain from speaking in a world where everything seems to be going in a bad direction. I can't write without writing about this." Among the issues increasingly addressed in contemporary literature are segregation, exclusion, and social marginalization. Such themes resonate with the multifaceted diagnosis of a declining welfare state advanced by scholars such as Nexø (2016; 2025), a perspective that is also present in Ravn's essay: "Our university education has deteriorated, we have large student loans, we know that we will most likely never receive early retirement benefits, and I also seriously doubt that I will ever receive a state pension".[6]

This points to a *third* factor: the return of class as a significant category in Danish literary discourse, from which it had largely been absent for decades. Symptomatically, from the 1980s onwards, "working-class literature" was increasingly reduced to "a historical term designating a tradition of the past" (Lund, 2020b, p. 50). When class re-emerged as a topic of literary and cultural debate, no

[6] Cf. the paradoxical nature of the Danish case: despite the Ravn-essay's concerns about "student loans," most higher education in Denmark is tuition-free, and students are eligible for state educational grants (approximately €950 per month in 2025) for up to 5.8 years (Uddannelses- og Forskningsstyrelsen, 2025).

widely recognized literary vocabulary seemed available for addressing contemporary class relations. Put somewhat playfully, precarity filled a gap in the market.

The order in which the above factors are presented does not imply a simple causal or unidirectional argument whereby developments in the "real world" shape contemporary fiction, which then in turn shapes public discussion of those developments. The claim is more modest: namely, that a correlation between these trends can be observed.

A *fourth* factor is the influence of Guy Standing's *The Precariat*. Neither precarious work and precarity nor concepts such as precariousness are new phenomena. However, the term *precariat* became associated with questions of employment and welfare primarily in the post-war period, albeit with significant national variations (Betti, 2018, pp. 277–278). In Denmark, the term began to appear in the late 2000s (see e.g. Andersen, 2006; Ekman, 2009), but it was primarily following the publication of Standing's *The Precariat* that precarity became an established and recurring feature of public debate.[7]

A *fifth* factor is the establishment of the previously mentioned UoL, which was made possible by a five-year grant of DKK 28 million (approximately €3.8 million) from the Danish National Research Foundation as part of the Niels Bohr Professorship awarded to Rita Felski. Most importantly in the present context of this chapter, one of the centre's work packages, involving nineteen participants, focused on "Class, Precarity and the Social Dimensions of Literature" (Tilly, 2022, p. 44).[8] Beyond academia, the concept also began to gain traction in the broader literary public around 2017 (see e.g. Sauerberg, 2017; Ravn, 2017; Pedersen, 2017). One reason is that UoL scholars working on precarity were simultaneously active as literary critics, published essays and commentaries in Danish media, and contributed to interviews, features, and discussions of contemporary literary trends (e.g. Aarhus, 2016; 2023; Lund, 2021b; Moestrup, 2023). This development is also related to the "small circuits" of the Danish literary sphere as literary professionals often have academic

[7] Searches of Denmark's largest media archive suggest that the term "precariat" had only a marginal presence in public discourse prior to the first reference to Standing's *The Precariat* in December 2012, appearing in only a handful of articles. Between October 2014 and October 2016, however, the term was mentioned in more than 25 articles, while the publication of the Danish translation in May 2017 was followed by a further increase in usage, with more than 30 mentions recorded thereafter.

[8] For a more detailed account of UoL and its work package on precarity, see Tilly (2022).

backgrounds in literary studies or related disciplines and are therefore influenced and informed by developments within the field. A further explanation is simply the growing prominence of the concept in public debate.

Tracking precarity

Simonsen and Haarder's essay has thus far been used to mark the beginning of the trajectory. It was not, however, the first contribution. An earlier example is Mathies Græsborg Aarhus's "Nedrykningsfortællinger" [Relegation Narratives] (2016), which centres on Jens Blendstrup's novel *Slagterkoner og bagerenker* [Butchers' Wives and Bakers' Widows] (2016), a work concerned with the theme of downward social mobility. Aarhus argues that, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, such narratives have become a central cultural trope responding to the emergence of what Oliver Nachtwey (2016) terms the "relegation society," closely linked to the spread of "so-called precarious work" (Aarhus, 2016). Although the essay does not explicitly mention UoL, it is closely connected to the centre. Prior to its publication, Aarhus had applied for a PhD position within UoL's precarity work package, which he eventually obtained.[9]

A similar background characterizes three articles written by, well, me (Lund, 2016; 2017; 2018). I, too, was in dialogue with Peter Simonsen, principal investigator of the precarity work package, who, much as he had done with Aarhus, encouraged me to incorporate the concept into an application for a potential research project. Although my work ultimately developed in a different direction, the concept of precarity, unknown to me before my contact with Simonsen, continued to play a central role as I began writing on class and literature.

The most extensive of these studies, "De fremtidsløse tager ordet" [The Futureless Take the Floor], argues for the "continued relevance [...] of the concept of class" in the study of Danish fiction (Lund, 2017, p. 28). It further presents Standing's work as "one of the most elaborate and ambitious proposals for [...] conceptualizing and problematizing a contemporary class reality" (Lund, 2017, p. 29). Like the essays by

[9] Although primarily concerned with American and British fiction, his dissertation *The Idle Feel: Unemployment and the Affects of Class in Contemporary Literature* (2020) includes a chapter on Danish literature, analysing Blendstrup's novel, Lau Aaen's *Dagpengeland* [Benefit Country] (2012) and Bent Vinn Nielsen's *Arbejdssky* [Work Shy] (1973).

Græsborg Aarhus and by Simonsen and Haarder, the article emphasizes an element of novelty. In all three texts, the "new" refers to (i) the return of inequality in supposedly post-class welfare states; (ii) the changing characteristics of the lower social strata; and (iii) the need for new analytical frameworks capable of capturing these developments.

"De fremtidsløse tager ordet" focuses on three principal examples: (i) Morten Pape's aforementioned *Planen*; (ii) Kenneth Jensen's *Tragedie plus tid* [Tragedy plus Time] (2015), whose narrator describes life as an unskilled worker at an industrial slaughterhouse; and (iii) Dennis Gade Kofod's *Nancy* (2015), a novel that combines fantasy and realism and is set on the island of Bornholm. The plot in Kofod's novel is driven by a mysterious fog that suddenly descends upon the island. As a consequence, the middle classes and the wealthy "lock up and leave to watch from a safe distance," while "those who can't make it financially" (Kofod 2015, p. 34) bear the brunt of the unfolding catastrophe. The article concludes that all three novels, albeit in different ways, "attempt to give voice and form to the experience of a new, contemporary and vulnerable class affiliation" characterized by "precarity" (Lund, 2017, p. 36).

It is important to stress that contributions to the trajectory have also emerged independently of the UoL network (see e.g. Gemzøe, 2017; Jørgensen, 2022; Andersen, 2023; Svendsen, 2023). This is true of another early contribution, "Ny bølge af arbejderlitteratur" [A New Wave of Working-Class Literature] (2016). The essay examines, among other titles, Lau Aaen's autofictional *Dagpengeland* [Benefits Country] (2012) – a satire depicting a university graduate trapped in an absurd unemployment system – as well as *Beton* [Concrete] (2011) by the construction worker and trade unionist Jakob Mathiasen, which addresses, among other issues, "how foreign labour [...] now [...] constitutes an underclass without rights in the society in which it works."

Such works may not correspond to conventional understandings of working-class literature, Staun argues, but they should nevertheless be regarded as contributions to that tradition. In this view, they depict a contemporary class society that can no longer be "entirely explained" through Marx's "two-class theory" and must instead be understood "in light of Guy Standing's theory of the precariat."

Consolidation, expansion, exit?

As demonstrated above, the first attempts to link precarity to Danish literature appeared in 2016. The *consolidation* of the trajectory, however, can be dated to the following year, when it began to gain greater visibility and momentum. In terms of scholarship, early 2017 saw the publication not only of "De fremtidsløse tager ordet" but also of Peter Simonsen's "Prekarisering og prekært arbejdsliv i Helle Helles roman *Ned til hundene*" [Precarisation and Precarious Working Lives in Helle Helle's Novel *Down to the Dogs*], which contains an expanded version of the analysis briefly outlined in his co-authored essay with Haarder presented initially.

Helle Helle also occupies a central position in Anker Gemzøe's chapter "Den sociale drejning" [The Social Turn] (2017), which discusses her novel *Hvis det er* [If You Want] (2014) and "its depiction of the precariat" (Gemzøe, 2017, p. 84). *Hvis det er* features two intertwined plotlines. The first tragicomically depicts two lost souls stranded in a forest following a fun run. One of these runners reappears in the second narrative, which reconstructs her life story, marked by temporary employment, repeated changes of address, and a general condition of instability and uncertainty. Gemzøe explicitly situates the novel within the tradition of working-class literature. In doing so, he elaborates upon the more rudimentary argument advanced by Staun and anticipates the subsequent studies that apply the concept of precarity to discussions of Danish working-class literature (see e.g. Simonsen, 2016; Lund, 2020b; 2021a; Lund et. al., 2023; Svendsen, 2023).

The most prominent scholarly contribution to the trajectory appeared in 2018, namely the article "Hvem kan tale for prekariatet – og hvorfra?" [Who Can Speak for the Precariat – and from Where?]. Co-authored by Haarder, Simonsen, and Camilla Schwartz, it shares several features with the former authors' 2017 essay. Most notably, its corpus once again includes *Døden kører Audi*, *Planen*, *Ned til hundene*, *Helt ude i hampen*, and *Yahya Hassan*.

The article is characterized by a greater degree of theoretical refinement, as Standing's framework is supplemented by the theorizations of Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey. Furthermore, it draws a clearer distinction between the notion of the precariat as a social class and the adjective *precarious*, which is "used to describe aspects of the vulnerable lives of all people in the [...] age of globalization." In the

same vein, the authors emphasize that precarity is unevenly distributed through processes of precarisation (Haarder, Simonsen, and Schwartz, 2018, p. 187).

The principal line of continuity is the article's focus on the challenges involved in "speaking for" the precariat, a concern that is particularly evident in its discussion of the "precarious narration" (Haarder, Simonsen, and Schwartz, 2018, p. 191) of *Døden kører Audi*. More strikingly, the "ghetto" writings of Pape and Hassan are connected to Primo Levi's paradox of the Holocaust's "true witnesses": "Only those who escape can tell the story of the precariousness of the concrete ghettos, but then they are no longer (quite so) precarious" (Haarder, Simonsen, and Schwartz, 2018, p. 193).

"Hvem kan tale for prekariatet – og hvorfra?" embodies several key characteristics of the trajectory (see e.g. Lund, 2018; Simonsen, 2018; Simonsen and Haarder, 2020; Haarder, 2020). One example is Troels Obbekjær's analysis of *Tragedie plus tid*, which likewise emphasizes the novel's "precarious style" and "the narrator's limited understanding of the precarious others" (Obbekjær, 2020, pp.101–102). Less concerned with questions of representation are Mathies Græsborg Aarhus's (2022a; 2022b) studies of the "theatre of the precariat," which examine plays such as Henrik Szklany's *Alle mulige ting til salg* [All Sorts of Things for Sale] (2018) and Liv Helm's *Prekariatet* [The Precariat] (2020). These contributions expand the trajectory by incorporating the dramatic genre. In terms of their overall argument, conceptual framing, and analytical focus, however, they largely follow the path of its dominant assumptions.[10]

A different perspective is presented by Marta Lopes Santos's article "Nostalgic and Precarious: The Affective Power of Objects in Olga Ravn's *De ansatte* (*The Employees*, 2018)." Bearing the subtitle "A Workplace Novel of the 22nd Century," Ravn's science-fiction novel stands apart from most of the works discussed thus far owing to its speculative aesthetics. Formally, *The Employees* consists of a series of interviews with crew members aboard a spaceship orbiting the distant planet "New Discovery." These interviews centre on how both human and humanoid employees are affected by objects retrieved from the planet and stored on the vessel. What gradually comes to light is that the crew's encounters with these alien artefacts lead

[10] Although less explicitly grounded in theories of precarity, a similar expansion can be observed in Troels Obbekjær's (2021) and Charlotte Fabricius's (2022) research on Danish rap lyrics and comics.

them to question the ship's work-centred mode of existence. Consequently, Santos argues, Ravn's representation of precarity develops into an ideological critique of the role of work in post-Fordist society: "[The novel] highlights how a sense of precarity is an affective condition that is not exclusive to those who are captive of a flexible, casualised labour market, but to everyone who must work to remain alive" (Santos, 2023, p. 45).[11]

Another offshoot of the trajectory is represented by Camilla Schwartz's *Take Me to Neverland*, which explores "adult-phobia and youth worship." In its fourth chapter, these themes are linked to the precariat, albeit with a distinctive focus on the upper strata of Standing's class formation, also categorised as the "middle class in disguise" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 153). The study foregrounds motifs, themes, and concerns that have been present since the trajectory's inception but have generally been subordinated to its tendency to associate precarity primarily with the social margins.

Schwartz's literary examples – Hanne Højgaard Viemose's *HHV, Frshwn. Dødsknaldet i Amazonas* [HHV, Frshwn. The Deathfuck in the Amazon] (2019), Christina Hagen's *Jungle* (2017), and Theis Ørntoft's *Solar* (2018) – all portray authors or authorial figures who may be "socially and economically insecure" while "simultaneously [being] powerful due to their cultural capital" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 201). Consequently, the protagonists' identification with the outsider position of the (real?) precariat is interpreted, among other things, as part of a strategy for resisting adult middle-class life. Such narratives therefore demonstrate how "the notion of a new common class, the precariat, seems very difficult to put into practice, as the idea, in praxis, contributes to fetishizing solidarity and camouflaging inequalities" (Schwartz, 2021, p. 201).

Differently put, Schwartz focuses on works dealing with what also has been described as "privileged precarity" (Lund, 2020a). This is mirrored in the literary public sphere, where the concept is often applied to works portraying *creative* freelancers, young university graduates struggling in urban labour and housing markets, artists, writers, and similar groups. Notably, when the concept is explicitly invoked in literary texts, these texts often thematize the conditions of literary production (see e.g. Graff, 2014; Kramtøft, 2022).

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[11] Similar arguments have been advanced in analyses of Jonas Eika's *Efter solen* [After the Sun] (2018) (Lund and Aarhus, 2023; Nikolajsen, 2020).

An example is Jeppe Krogsgaard Christensen's *Et år med læsning og skrivning* [A Year of Reading and Writing] (2024), which depicts the daily life of the narrator, an author and freelance cultural worker, who identifies himself as part of the "well-educated and well-formulated underclass" (Christensen, 2024, p.10). This self-identification, however, does not seamlessly align with his overall life situation. Although he never buys new clothes and skips dentist appointments, he nevertheless resides in a house in the desirable region of North Zealand and spends family holidays in Alsace. This is made possible largely by his wife's income. Still, it prompts a process of self-negotiation: "Now I […] wonder whether I can allow myself to call myself part of an underclass. In a home 400 meters from [the sea and the forest]." His conclusion? "I think I'm allowed to do that. What others think is up to them" (Christensen, 2024, p. 47).

The most comprehensive study of "precarity among Danish authors" is Johanne Gormsen Schmidt's "The Writer as Worker" (2022), which can be described as a literary-sociological intervention into "theories relating cultural work to precarity" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 53). Its central observation is that the private finances of most authors are modest and unstable and depend on a "piecing together of different kinds of work and different incomes" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 59). A crucial element in this situation is the system of grants distributed by the Danish Arts Foundation, which are intended to support artistic creation financially. Schmidt argues, however, that these grants often have the opposite effect, since they "do not count as paid work in the Danish system of unemployment benefits." As a result, it is often "very difficult for […] holders to earn the right to benefits" once a grant period has ended (Schmidt, 2020, p. 58).

This paradox is encountered by the "privileged" protagonist – a poet, father, and former literary scholar – in Nicolaj Zeuthen's novel *Buemundet guitarfisk*. After a period of getting by on a Danish Arts Foundation grant, he applies for social benefits, only to be informed that he is not eligible for the highest rate because the grant money is not recognized as income from paid employment. Thus, both Zeuthen's novel and Schmidt's study highlight a contradiction between two political agendas. The arts grant system embodies a traditional welfare-state conviction that culture constitutes a social good deserving public support. Yet this clashes with the logic of the competition state, according to which access to the highest level of social protection depends on participation in paid employment.

Still, the equation of *author = precarious worker* is not unequivocally supported by Danish writers themselves. Schmidt identifies one overarching position characterized by "a wish to equate writers as much as possible with full-time wage earners in order to protect them from their potential precarity" (Schmidt, 2020, pp. 61–62). This view is, however, countered by another general stance emphasizing that "doing arts work has hardly ever been fuelled by the promise of financial security and success" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 63). Furthermore, for some of the interviewees, "low income and low job security do not imply any notable frustration" (Schmidt, 2020, p. 64). Instead, they value the "freedom" afforded by this way of life (Schmidt, 2020, p. 64).

As such, the article touches upon a central issue in the Danish discussion of precarity. If, following the Danish think tank KRAKA, one regards involuntariness as a key definitional feature of precarity (Steen-Knudsen et al., 2019, p. 2), then it is indeed problematic to classify authors as precarious, given that they have actively chosen their profession. On the other hand, it can be argued that, despite this element of individual choice, writers and other creative workers are nevertheless affected by broader processes of precarisation mediated through, for example, reforms of social and labour-market policies.

The "consolidation phase" also represents the high point of the trajectory, as studies of the topic have become less frequent in recent years.[12] The body of scholarly and critical writing is by no means homogeneous. Nevertheless, three overarching tendencies can be identified. First, Danish literary engagements with precarity have predominantly focused on representations of socio-economically marginalized characters enduring adverse conditions at the margins of a declining welfare state. Second, a recurring concern has been the challenge of representing the precariat. Third, despite considerable variation, the works discussed here participate in the repoliticisation of twenty-first-century Danish literature, insofar as they collectively constitute a literature of broad socio-political critique.

The mainstre3am tendency, however, also branches out into several tributaries. One strand mobilizes the concept to revitalize the notion of working-class literature;

[12] A preliminary apex is marked by two edited volumes initiated by UoL: the widely profiled anthology *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (2021), which adopts a broader international perspective, and the *Scandinavica* special issue *Scandinavian States of Insecurity* (2020).

another employs it to engage in ideological discussions of work and labour; while a third focuses on what has been described as "middle-class precarity." The latter observation refers to Schwartz's chapter, which also exemplifies another development within the field. In the earliest contributions, precarity itself occupies centre stage, as scholars tend to focus on what precarity is and how it is represented in Danish literature. Over time, however, the concept increasingly assumes a more auxiliary function, serving as a lens through which to examine other themes, motifs, and concerns, including adult-phobia, unemployment, apathy, and gentrification.

Three p's of precarity: Conclusions and suggestions

The trajectory outlined in the chapter is arguably a distinctly local one. Nevertheless, it offers broader insights into the relationship between precarisation and literature. Most importantly, the meta-historical analysis of the Danish case challenges macro-causal explanations for the emergence of this connection. Rather, the recognition of literature about precarity across contemporary national contexts is the result of a multifaceted process shaped by – and responding to – a range of political, historical, socio-economic, cultural, literary, and academic developments operating at global, local, and transnationally mediated levels.

The chapter's findings are summarized and discussed in the concluding remarks, which revolve around three key terms. In condensed form, the argument is that the uses of the concept of precarity in Danish literary discourse have been *profiled*, *problematic*, and *productive*.

The concept's *profiled* character simply refers to its prominence within discussions of Danish literature, particularly in literary scholarship after 2017.[13] The *problematic* aspects of precarity tie back to the challenges of generality and imprecision highlighted in the volume's foreword. The trajectory is informed to a considerable extent by international theory conveying universalizing conceptions of precarity. Yet the concept is often – though not in every instance – adapted rather than merely applied to the Danish context, for example by anchoring precarity in the specificities

[13] The concept's prominence in Danish literary studies becomes even more apparent when scholarship on non-Danish literature is taken into account (e.g. Hogg, 2021; Hogg and Simonsen, 2020; Simonsen and Aarhus, 2021).

of local housing policies, social security systems, and related institutional arrangements.

Illustrative of this conceptual ambiguity is the marked instability of a key term in several studies: the precariat. The issue is not with the various renderings of Standing's concept as such, but rather with how its boundaries tend to dissolve when applied to literary material. Put somewhat polemically, literary works, characters, and authors are frequently associated with the precariat while simultaneously being described in terms of deviation, distance, or disidentification from it.

It is important to stress that this chapter does not claim to offer a definitive interpretation of what precarity is or how the terminology ought to be applied. But it does argue for the need to consider carefully – and to clarify – what exactly we mean when we talk about precarity in literature. In continuation of these observations, the chapter proposes four suggestions for future research.

The first is simply to abandon the notion of the *precariat* as an analytical concept. This may appear to be a drastic proposal. However, it follows directly not only from the observations above but also from the chapter's overall analysis. Indeed, the chapter has echoed – while also qualifying – a widespread and well-known criticism of Standing's concept of the precariat, namely that "the status of the concept is unclear" (Gleerup et al., 2018, p. 24). Within Danish literary studies, this conceptual ambiguity has furthermore tended to encourage rather unproductive discussions of whether X, Y, or Z can legitimately be classified as part of the precariat and, thus, can be said to speak for it.

The second suggestion is to give analytical precedence to *precarisation* understood as a multifaceted social process. From this perspective, precarisation does not forge a new social class; rather, it permeates and affects different segments of society, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. Consequently, it does not supplant traditional class divisions but interacts with them. In relation to the first suggestion, this approach shifts the central question from whether a given character can be identified as belonging to the precariat to how X, Y, or Z is affected by and experiences processes of precarisation.

A third proposal concerns the trajectory's prioritization of the ethical or epistemological aspects of the *representations* of precarity. Several studies are centred on discussions of whether a given literary text unearths authentic experiences of

precarity. This is inarguably relevant but must be supplemented with an approach that does not ask how literature expresses precarity, but rather how it interprets it – and thus contributes to the discursive construction of the concept.

The final suggestion addresses the widespread presentism that emphasizes the supposedly novel qualities of precarity. Yet neither socio-economic insecurity nor temporary forms of employment – and, by extension, literary representations of such conditions – are historically new phenomena. Rather, several scholars have argued that precarisation constitutes a fundamental feature of capitalism itself, one that was temporarily mitigated and contained during the Fordist era, particularly within the Nordic welfare states (e.g. Breman, 2013; Hirslund, 2019). From this perspective, contemporary forms of precarity appear less as unprecedented developments than as the re-emergence or intensification of more longstanding dynamics.

For Danish literary scholarship, this insight calls for a more historically oriented approach and for a reconsideration of existing claims to novelty. Rather than asking what is entirely new about contemporary representations of insecurity, future research might more productively investigate how changing forms of precarisation are embedded within longer historical trajectories and literary traditions.

With all this in mind, the *productivity* of precarity is impossible to dispute. The concept has played a central role in the (re)introduction of a range of social and political perspectives into Danish literary discourse. This makes the earlier observation concerning the recent decline of interest in precarity particularly noteworthy. Yet it may be more accurate to suggest that the trajectory remains vibrant, albeit in new guises and institutional contexts. For instance, several contemporary Scandinavian research projects (Malmö universitet, 2025; Universitetet i Bergen, 2025) draw extensively on and further develop insights generated by Danish scholarship. Likewise, a number of newer Danish research initiatives can be seen as extensions of this trajectory through their engagement with topics such as the *future of work* (Tilly, 2022, p. 59–60), *feminized labour* (Hogg and Fabricius, 2025), and empirical studies of *readers of class fiction* (Aarhus, 2024).

In their 2017 essay, Simonsen and Haarder posed the following rhetorical question: "Maybe it's about time to talk just a bit more about class distinctions and a bit less about cultural differences." As this chapter has demonstrated, precarity has served as an important framework for bringing this and related issues back onto the Danish

literary agenda. Despite the ambiguities and conceptual challenges that have accompanied its use, the concept has importantly functioned as an analytical multi-tool for reopening the social questions in studies of Danish literature.

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Chapter 2.

Post-Swedish Model Writing:

Precarisation and Political Imagination in Contemporary Literature

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In recent years, precarity has become an important theme in Swedish literature.[1] In particular, it has received much attention in works that, to varying degrees, draw on the authors' personal experiences of precarious labour and have been widely acclaimed by readers and critics. Prominent examples – all of which will be discussed in this chapter – include Kristian Lundberg's (1966–2022) poetic prose narrative *Yarden* [The Yard] (2009), which describes temporary labour in the docks in Malmö; Daria Bogdanska's (b. 1988) graphic novel *Wage slaves* (2016, published in English as *Wage Slaves* in 2019) about undocumented migrants working in restaurants in the same city; and Anders Teglund's (b. 1983) *Cykelbudet* [The Bicycle Courier] (2021), which portrays gig work in Gothenburg during the COVID-19 pandemic.[2]

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[1] The research presented in this chapter has been carried out within the research environment "Precariat, Precarity, and Precarious Lives in (Post-) Welfare-State Scandinavian Literatures," which is funded by the Swedish Research Council (project-ID 2022-01839_VR).

[2] Other noteworthy works include David Ericsson's (b. 1958) novel *Taxfree* (2004), which explores how competition from Eastern European low-wage labour increases precarity in the Swedish labour market; Johan Jönson's (b. 1966) nearly 800-page poetry volume *Efter arbetsschema* [According to Work Schedule] (2006), where temporary and unregulated work is a central motif; Pelle Sunvisson's (b. 1980) novels *Svarta bär* [Black Berries] and *Svenska palmen* [The Swedish Palm Tree] (both 2021), based on the author's undercover experiences with migrant labour in the unregulated job market; and Emil Boss's (b. 1979) poetry collection *Kompression* [Compression] (2023) about migrants working in the unregulated labour market. For a comprehensive analysis of the representation of precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature, see Nilsson (2025).

At first glance, this may seem paradoxical. Why does labour-market precarity figure so prominently in literature from a country often associated with high employment security and a strong welfare state providing a safety net for those who cannot find employment? This chapter argues that the answer to this question is that labour-market precarity not only is understood as a problem in itself but also functions as a metonym for a perceived historical transformation, namely the erosion of the Swedish labour-market and welfare-state model. It also explores the political implications of this framing.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. It begins by examining what is arguably the most influential literary account of precarious labour in contemporary Swedish literature – Lundberg's *Yarden* – showing how its depiction of precarity is closely bound up with the idea that the Swedish model is undergoing erosion, and how this shapes its distinctive melodramatic style. It then broadens the perspective to a range of other texts, demonstrating that they likewise interpret precarisation in relation to the decline of this model, albeit in different aesthetic registers. Thereafter, the chapter shows how these works complicate the notion that precarity belongs to the present while security belongs to the past, instead foregrounding the coexistence of insecurity and residual forms of welfare-state protection, and emphasising that precarisation is shaped by political decisions. Particular attention is paid here to Patrik Lundberg's (b. 1983; not related to Kristian Lundberg) novel *Fjärilsvägen* [Butterfly Road] which has been widely acclaimed but has hitherto not been explicitly associated with terms such as precarity or precarisation. Finally, the chapter explores the political implications of these representations, focusing on questions of agency, temporality, nostalgia, and the role of labour-movement politics in responding to precarisation.

Precarity as a scandal – Melodrama and the Swedish model in *Yarden*

The auto-diegetic narrator in *Yarden* criticises his precarious working conditions in quite explicit and drastic terms. For example, he describes his situation as a temporary agency worker as "diabolical" (Lundberg, 2009, p. 71) and claims that precarious labour deprives workers of their humanity (p. 50) and turns them, in the eyes of others, into vermin (p. 41).

This hyperbolic imagery can be read as an example of what literary scholar Christine Hamm has called Lundberg's *melodramatic* mode of narration, which also includes stylistic features such as repetitions of key words, clichéd metaphors, direct addresses to the reader, and a lack of nuances (Hamm, 2014, pp. 207–208). Hamm views Lundberg's melodramatic style as a product of his fear that he will not be understood by (bourgeois) readers who lack personal experiences of precarious labour. However, this explanation can be extended. The narrator's fear of not being understood is not only epistemological (a gap in experience) but also political: it reflects *a sense of urgency* grounded in the conviction that his working conditions are scandalous and must be exposed.

This urgency is, in turn, conditioned by a specific relationship to what is commonly referred to as *the Swedish model* – the welfare-state and labour-market regime established in Sweden during the twentieth century (similar arrangements were developed in the other Nordic countries and are often referred to collectively as *the Nordic model*). Its key features include an extensive welfare state; active state intervention in the economy, especially through active labour-market and business cycle policies; near-comprehensive trade union density and collective bargaining coverage; and ambitious labour protection laws.

This historical framework helps clarify why precarity appears so salient in the present. As literary scholar Liam Connell (2017, p. 4) argues, what distinguishes our present conjuncture is not simply "growing levels of insecurity" but "an accompanying sense of loss for socialised forms of security that are recent in the memory but that no longer apply." Precarity thus gains significance not only through its expansion, but through its contrast with relatively recent experiences of stability. A related point, emphasised by cultural theorist Brett Neilson and media scholar Ned Rossiter (2008, p. 54), is that "[p]recarity appears as an irregular phenomenon only when set against a Fordist or Keynesian norm," while in "regulatory contexts where the social state has maintained less grip," it does not register as "an exceptional condition."

The Swedish model constitutes precisely such a context. As sociologist Johan Alfonsson (2022, p. 19) notes, it produced a high degree of security: employment protection was strong, unemployment insurance generous, and the welfare state provided an extensive safety net through pensions, disability benefits, child benefits,

and other forms of social support. In such a setting, precarity does not simply exist – it stands out as a deviation from an established norm.

Against this background, the prominence of precarity in contemporary Swedish literature becomes more intelligible. In recent decades, the Swedish model has been significantly reconfigured. Sociologist Göran Therborn (2018, p. 15) has characterised these developments as a neoliberal "counter-revolution," involving cuts to welfare institutions, liberalisation of labour-market regulations, and increased exposure to global competition. While these changes have contributed to rising insecurity, Sweden remains, in comparative terms, a relatively secure society. The significance of precarity in this context therefore cannot be explained by absolute levels of insecurity alone. Rather, it reflects a perceived historical shift, in which existing forms of insecurity are interpreted against the backdrop of a still-recent regime of stability. In this sense, precarity functions as a metonym for the erosion of the Swedish model: it becomes visible, and politically charged, precisely insofar as it appears as a departure from a historically grounded horizon of security.

This dynamic is particularly visible in *Yarden*, where contemporary precarity is explicitly juxtaposed with the security associated with the heyday of the Swedish model. When the narrator compares his current situation with that of growing up in a poor working-class family in the 1970s and 1980s, he emphasizes that then the welfare state provided a safety net: "There was housing policy. There was social policy" (Lundberg, 2009, p. 81). When reflecting on the differences between his current working conditions and those he experienced when working in the docks twenty years earlier, he highlights that then he was represented by a "belligerent union" (p. 65). Today, however, neither he nor his co-workers are union members (p. 65). They are not even aware of their rights: "I cannot demand my rights, because I do not know what they are. For example, shouldn't there be a ban on handwashing cars in freezing weather? I don't know. Ahmed doesn't know" (p. 28).

These contrasts show that Lundberg's melodramatic style is shaped by an understanding of contemporary precarity as a sign of a broader historical transformation: the dismantling of the institutions and the erosion of the ideals associated with the Swedish model.

Precarity and the Swedish model

In several works portraying precarisation, historical descriptions of the Swedish model do not merely provide background context but actively structure how precarity is understood. Much like in *Yarden*, they function as a backdrop against which today's lack of security becomes visible, thereby producing an image of two distinct epochs: the era (or heyday) of the Swedish model and contemporary globalised capitalism in which neoliberal policies fuel processes of precarisation.

The protagonist in Elise Karlsson's (b. 1981) critically acclaimed breakthrough novel *Linjen* [The Line] (2015), Emma, is a young woman occupying a precarious position in the labour market. Early in the novel, she describes her work-life experiences as follows: "It is usually a temporary position. Otherwise, an internship. A summer job. An hourly or project-based position. A temporary agency position. A part-time position" (Karlsson, 2015, p. 9). Thus, it is hardly surprising that literary critic and scholar Stefan Johnson (2015) has argued that *Linjen* "expresses what sociologists mean when they talk about 'the precariat' as the new class of our time."

In *Linjen*, the emergence of this new class is connected to the waning of ideals associated with the Swedish model. This is signalled already in the novel's title, which references the so-called "arbetslinjen" [work line] – a neoliberal political programme launched by the non-socialist parties that won the 2006 general elections in Sweden. In short, it consisted in lowering the income tax while at the same time cutting down unemployment and sickness benefits – with the aim of creating increased incentives for Swedes to find employment. Thus, it represented a significant departure from central principles of the Swedish model, where high taxes were used to provide a high level of security also for those who could not find employment.

Linjen also includes a striking nightmare scene that recalls Kafka's parable "Before the Law" in *The Trial*. In Karlsson's version, however, what the protagonist is denied access to is not the law but permanent employment, and the gatekeeper is not Kafka's bearded figure but a trade union official (Karlsson, 2015, p. 51). This reflects a central theme in neoliberal critiques of the Swedish model: the notion that strong unions – a foundational element in this system – constitute obstacles to employment, particularly for younger workers.

A similar logic is evident in the protagonist's fear, once she has eventually been given a permanent contract, that she is "the last one in" (i.e. the last one to be hired). This

concept refers to the Swedish Employment Protection Act, which requires workplaces to fire staff according to a list of seniority; given similar tasks, the last employee to be hired should be the first to be fired. The Employment Protection Act is generally viewed as a cornerstone in the Swedish model and has for decades been vehemently attacked by neoliberals. Thus, *Linjen* is definitely set in a post-Swedish model world.

Anders Teglund's (b. 1983) *Cykelbudet* [The Bicycle Courier] (2021) is a diary-novel about the author's experiences of gig work during the COVID-19 pandemic. It very explicitly relates contemporary labour-market precarity to the Swedish model. For example, Teglund explicitly mentions this model several times (see, e.g. Teglund, 2021, pp. 262, 362) and describes gig jobs as a threat to it. He also compares his own situation as a gig worker with that of his grandfather, Ernfrid, whose working life coincided with "the golden era of traditional social democracy":

> 1938 [...] comes the first-ever legislation about paid vacation. Twelve days of paid leisure every year. It will get even better gradually. Four decades later, toward the end of Ernfrid's working life, paid vacation for industrial workers has been extended to five weeks. He works in the factory his whole life and is a pensioner in the eighties, before dying in 1990 after a short period of illness. (Teglund, 2021, p. 111)

Teglund also compares his experiences of working as a bicycle courier with when he was young and worked at a gas station. Then, his boss recommended him, already on his first day of work, to join a union (Teglund, 2021, p. 254). This creates a sharp contrast between contemporary labour-market conditions and those during the heyday of the Swedish model, which was upheld jointly by strong unions and employer organisations that both wanted to avoid excessive legislation and state intervention.

Rolf Almström's (b. 1961) novel *Svart arbete* [Unregulated Labour] (2009) is based – at least in part – on the author's own experiences of cash-in-hand work (Ullsjö, 2010). Its auto-diegetic narrator, Danny, is a man in his early twenties from the working-class suburb Frölunda in Gothenburg. Unable to find stable employment during the economic crisis in Sweden in the 1990s, he and his friends end up in the informal economy, working in construction as day labourers without contracts under terrible working conditions.

Svart arbete opens with a short parable – "Master Palm's Pear Tree" – which is not part of the novel's main storyline, and not narrated by Danny, but by an anonymous (hetero-diegetic) narrator. The pear tree in the parable is one from which the socialist agitator August Palm gave a famous speech in 1882. (He delivered the speech from a tree because he was unable to rent an indoor venue.) A century later, the city of Malmö, which was where Palm gave his speech, decided to build a new city hall. The location chosen was where the pear tree stood, and since it was considered to be of historical importance, it was decided that the city hall should be built around it. However, the contractor decided to cut it down. For this, he had to pay a fee, but since building around the tree would have been complicated, that would have been more expensive. The parable ends as follows: "All that remains is, thus, a fold in the building. And in that fold, in the void left by Master Palm's pear tree, this story lives" (Almström, 2009, p. 9).

What, then, does this parable mean? One possible answer is given in a scene describing Danny attending a course at the employment agency. There, a lecturer delivers the following message to the unemployed workers: "You must understand that there is always someone who can make it cheaper somewhere else – all that stuff with unions and the state intervening and saving jobs ... I mean, all that shit is over, gone, outplayed" (Almström, 2009, p. 111). Here, the world in which the story told in *Svart arbete* is set is described as one in which the era of the Swedish model – during which unions and state interventions in the economy secured stable jobs for workers – has collapsed and been replaced by a globalised capitalism in which Swedish workers compete with workers all over the world. August Palm was a pioneer in the social-democratic labour movement that built the Swedish model. The void left when his pear tree was cut down symbolises the dismantling – and lingering absence – of that model.

Across these works, precarity is thus consistently framed as the result of a historical rupture: the dismantling of the institutional and political structures associated with the Swedish model. What varies is not this basic narrative, but the aesthetic and narrative forms through which it is articulated.

Precarisation between history and political agency

Historicising precarisation by contrasting it with the conditions during the heyday of the Swedish model makes precarity and the injustices associated with it visible and

provides a narrative frame for understanding them. From a political point of view, however, such a temporal framing risks limiting the space for agency, insofar as it locates alternatives to contemporary insecurity entirely in the past.

However, several works in contemporary Swedish literature complicate this narrative, insisting that even if precarity is a result of the waning of the Swedish model, the two phenomena do not necessarily belong to different epochs. Lundberg's *Yarden* is one such work. Even if its *style* – as discussed by Hamm (2014, p. 208) – is characterised by a lack of nuances, its *narrative account* of the relationship between contemporary precarity and the Swedish model is in fact quite nuanced. When pointing out that, in his youth, the welfare state provided him with a safety net, the protagonist also highlights that it was not infallible: "It did not always work, but often enough it did" (Lundberg, 2009, p. 81). In particular, the description of the protagonist's terrible childhood – he grew up in poverty with a single mother suffering from mental illness – shows that the welfare state was never any paradise for all working-class people.

Furthermore, the precarity that the protagonist in *Yarden* experiences in the contemporary labour-market is not only contrasted with conditions in the past, but also with the relative security enjoyed by other workers, as in the following scene from one of his workplaces:

> The others rotate, throw packages around for an hour, then drive trucks, scan or whatever else they do. That's not how it is for us temps. We stand in our place. Hour after hour; about me, you can say: "Let him do it! We're not going to clean up after him!" And then I do what no one else wants to do. (Lundberg, 2009, p. 14)

This passage highlights that precarity is not simply a temporal condition but a differentiated position within the same labour market.

A similar contrast can be found in Almström's *Svart arbete.* Whereas for the protagonist and his workmates "negotiated salaries" and "social benefits" are "unattainable" (Almström, 2009, p. 50) – for other workers, the system still works. The novel also highlights that Danny actually has at least some access to the welfare state. That he nevertheless chooses to work in the unregulated labour market is because he finds it embarrassing to depend on unemployment benefits (p. 124) and because it would only give him a very "modest" income compared to what he can

make in the unregulated labour market (p. 139). He is also not very impressed with the various kinds of job-training that the unemployed are offered (p. 19).

In Teglund's *Cykelbudet* too, contemporary labour-market precarity is described as existing side by side with the security associated with the Swedish model. While gig work is presented as a threat to this model, or a symbol for its demise, the gig workers are not positioned entirely outside it. For example, Teglund describes how unions are sometimes able to help them (Teglund, 2021, p. 126), how state institutions like the Work Environment Authority can put pressure on platform companies to improve working conditions (p. 126), and how also those who work for such companies have access to some social security systems, such as sick pay (p. 142).

This relativisation of the relationship between precarisation and the Swedish model gives a quite correct picture of the conditions in contemporary Sweden: even if some of its institutions have been weakened in recent decades, the welfare state has not ceased to exist; and even if the Swedish labour-market model has been under attack, primarily by ambitions within the EU to regulate labour markets, it has not been abolished (see Fransson & Wennemo, 2024, p. 17). It also has a political advantage – showing that precarisation is not an all-encompassing process and that security is not a thing of the past may make it easier to mobilise people in struggles against labour-market precarity.

Furthermore, by connecting precarisation to concrete political programs and decisions, several works highlight that it is not an inevitable result of any abstract historical development, but something that is promoted by certain groups and can be challenged by others. One work that certainly invites such a reading is Karlsson's *Linjen*, which points already in its title – as has been discussed above – to neoliberal attacks on the Swedish model. Teglund too describes precarity as a product of political decisions, highlighting that the business model of the platform company for which he works is based on a specific form of employment that has recently been introduced in Swedish legislation and that the exploitation of gig workers is made possible by new "migration and labour-market laws" (Teglund, 2021, pp. 203, 314).

Another example of how precarisation is described as the product of political decisions can be found in Almström's *Svart arbete*. "It's called politics," Danny says when he and his workmates discuss the increasing inequalities in Swedish society

(Almström, 2009, p. 225). And, in a conversation with his mother, he says the following: "They are tearing it all down now, mum ... all the stuff that you guys and those before you built up ... it's gone" (p. 219). What is being torn down is the Swedish model, and those tearing it down are the coalition of non-socialist parties that came into power after the 1991 national elections in Sweden, when the Social Democrats lost power for only the second time since 1932 (pp. 225, 231, 246).

A work that encompasses many of the ideas expressed in contemporary Swedish literature about precarity, and that points especially clearly to their roots in neoliberal politics, is Patrik Lundberg's autobiographical novel *Fjärilsvägen*, about the life and death of the author's mother. It opens with a scene describing the last time he sees her alive:

> It was summer, and I had driven to the small town where you now lived.
>
> When I rang the doorbell, it took several minutes before you opened the door. Your eyes had yellowed; your stomach had swollen. You had bruises on your arms, and your hair had lost its shine, your scent was unrecognisable.
>
> You turned around and grabbed your walker, shuffled forward and explained that you sometimes had to use a wheelchair. Your feet ached as if every step were on broken glass and had done so for ages. You had developed diabetes and agoraphobia and had panic attacks. In the evenings, blue lights often lit up your driveway.
>
> You had just turned 67. (Lundberg, 2020, p. 7)

This picture of a human wreck is juxtaposed with a description of the time when she was born:

> The world wars were over, and the boom years were here. Prime Minister Tage Erlander continued building Per Albin Hansson's social-democratic welfare state.
>
> The hunger and poverty that your parents grew up in were fading away […]. People had access to unemployment insurance and universal supplementary pension. Compulsory universal health insurance was about to become a reality, as was three weeks' holiday.
>
> The country you were going to live in offered a social safety net and more opportunities than ever before. (p. 9)

This juxtaposition constructs a temporal arc in which the promises of the welfare state are measured against their later unravelling.

The novel's account of her life story also suggests that it has been conditioned by the rise and demise of this model. During the economic crisis in the 1990s, when several of her colleagues were let go, she got to stay on, due to her seniority. This principle – which is central to the Swedish Employment Protection Act – is generally viewed as a symbol for the social-democratic labour-market model, as is highlighted in *Fjärilsvägen* in an almost overly obvious manner, when it is associated with May Day parades: "You had worked at the Social Insurance Agency for nearly two decades, which meant you had a secure job. I remembered all the times Paula and I walked with you in the May Day parade. We wore our best clothes, held hands and sang along when the music school orchestra played *The Internationale*" (p. 43).

When her health begins deteriorating and she is abandoned by her husband, the protagonist's mother relies increasingly on the welfare state. At first, she alternates between work and sick pay (p. 111), but eventually she is granted a disability pension (p. 131). This does not make her life a bed of roses – her own and her family's economic margins are "minimal" – but she does scrape by (Lundberg, 2020, p. 111). However, with time her situation becomes more precarious, as the welfare state comes under political attack:

> Already during Göran Persson's time, the state was hounding people on sick leave and the unemployed, but Reinfeldt's policies took it to new levels.
>
> […]
>
> New health insurance rules meant that people on long-term sick leave risked losing their insurance and being deprived of their compensation. Critics called the rule the 'gallows' [...].
>
> The loss of benefits meant that everyone from the burnt-out to the terminally ill lost their income and had to be supported by family members or no one at all.
>
> You were at risk. (pp. 121–122)[3]

[3] Göran Persson was a social-democratic minister of finance (1994–1996) and prime minister (1996–2006) who is often accused of pushing the Social Democratic Party in a neoliberal direction. Fredrik

Eventually, she does fall through the gaps in the safety net that the neoliberal attacks on the Swedish model have opened up. When her children realise that she is living in misery, they contact the municipality's social services – but to little avail. Only after the narrator's sister has fought for six months, spending hours on the phone with bureaucrats, does her mother get minimal assistance (p. 157). And, on her deathbed, she is once again let down by the welfare state. After having fallen in her home, she ends up in a coma. When her children visit her at the hospital, they are told that they will be informed if her condition worsens. "In Sweden, no one dies alone in a hospital," they are told (p. 171). But their mother does: "You died alone, in a Swedish hospital where no one should die alone," the narrator says.

The narrator interprets his mother's death as a symbol for how her life was intimately connected to the rise and demise of the Swedish model. When going through her finances after her death, he has an epiphany: "The pieces fell into place. The women's movement of your generation believed that the personal was political, but for you there was another dimension: everything that affected poorly educated women affected you; politics was personal to you" (p. 174).

In a long passage he then juxtaposes the rhetoric of various right-wing politicians with his mother's fate. For example, he quotes a tweet by the leader of the Christian Democrats, Ebba Busch (deputy prime minister of Sweden at the time of writing): "Low pension after parental leave, part-time work and low-paid jobs? Is this inequality? Make different choices, get different results." Then he asks rhetorically which alternatives his mother had (Lundberg, 2020, p. 174). He also quotes right-wing politician Elisabeth Svantesson (Swedish finance minister at the time of writing), who demanded that it should be impossible to "stack benefits on top of each other" – and says that his mother never "piled up" her sick benefits, but "often cried all the way to the bank" (Lundberg, 2020, p. 174).[4] Here, individual suffering

Reinfeldt succeeded Persson as prime minister and led the right-wing government that between 2006 and 2014 accelerated the neoliberal "reforms" in Sweden.

[4] This insistence that a parent's death is the result of policies promoted by named politicians resembles the rhetoric in Édouard Louis's *Qui a tué mon père?* (2018, published in English as *Who Killed My Father?*). Another possible intertext/source of inspiration is Swedish working-class writer Ivar Lo-Johansson's (1901–1990) novel *Bara en mor* (1939; published in English as *Only a Mother* in 1991). It tells the tragic story of a proletarian woman's life in the rural proletariat during the early twentieth century. What makes it tragic is that her misery develops against the backdrop of the rise of the labour

is explicitly linked to concrete policy changes, reinforcing the novel's insistence on the political production of precarity.

Taken together, these works challenge the notion that precarity simply replaces the Swedish model, instead depicting a contradictory present in which elements of security and insecurity coexist and are unevenly distributed.

Nostalgia? Progressive memory and political imagination

Almström's *Svart arbete* not only insists that precarity is a product of political decisions. It also proposes a political strategy for fighting it; when contemplating his situation, Danny concludes that – in the long run – only unions can help him and others doing precarious labour (Almström, 2009, p. 68). This is also the conclusion reached in *Cykelbudet*, which not only criticises gig work but also describes how the protagonist becomes a union organiser and takes part in the (successful!) struggle to secure a collective agreement at the company for which he works.

This strategy for fighting precarisation is often dismissed in theoretical and political discussions. Standing (2014, p. 192), for example, associates "labourism" (i.e. labour-movement politics) with what he calls "the 'bad' precariat," a reactionary class fraction "fuelled by nostalgia for an imagined golden age." The contrasting of precarisation in contemporary Swedish literature with the heyday of the Swedish model, and the promotion of labour-movement politics as a way to revive this model, could very well be – and has been – called nostalgic.[5] However, I argue that this form of nostalgia is not reactionary, but constitutes a politically productive engagement with the past.

As Carolina Flores (2025) argues, one of the central political problems of nostalgia is that "it distorts our vision of the past by ignoring its negative aspects." While this may be true in some of the works discussed in this chapter – consider, for example, Teglund's description of how his grandparents benefitted from the welfare-state

movement and its demands for social reform (see Nilsson, 2003). In Lundberg's *Fjärilsvägen*, we instead get a story about how political attacks on the social-democratic project result in tragedy.

[5] The neoliberal critic Mattias Svensson has accused Lundberg's *Fjärilsvägen* of expressing "identity-political nostalgia" for a period when social democracy was the dominant political force in Sweden (Svensson, 2020). Historian and literary scholar Magnus Gustafson has also characterised Lundberg's description in *Yarden* of the heyday for the Swedish model as nostalgic (Gustafson, 2020, p. 115).

reforms – it is by no means a sin committed in all of them. That Kristian Lundberg does not shy away from describing the misery he experienced growing up in a poor family during the heyday of the Swedish model has already been mentioned. In *Fjärilsvägen*, Patrik Lundberg also describes how his childhood in a working-class family was marked by poverty, despite the existence of a strong welfare state.

The juxtaposition of precarisation with the Swedish model in contemporary Swedish literature also has an interesting political edge that is conditioned by Sweden's political history. In *Left-Wing Melancholia*, historian Enzo Traverso describes a shift in left-wing thinking. Historically, he argues, Marxists have subscribed to a "vision of history" which has "implied a memorial prescription: we had to inscribe the events of the past in our historical consciousness in order to project ourselves into the future. It was a 'strategic' memory of past emancipatory struggles, a future-oriented memory" (Traverso, 2016, p. 13). However, the failure and collapse of Soviet communism, he claims, has made this "dialectic between past and future" impossible and led to the emergence of a more melancholic vision of history on the Left, one in which memories of defeat and disaster have replaced those of emancipatory struggles (pp. 12–13). In a Swedish context, however, the Marxist vision of history described by Traverso has not necessarily lost its relevance. Even if the labour movement is not as strong as it once was in Sweden, and even if its most important achievement – the Swedish model – is under attack, it has not collapsed like Soviet communism. Therefore, it may still serve as both a source of inspiration and an actual resource in struggles against precarious labour.

As philosopher Axel Honneth has argued, memories of past reforms are a fundamental resource for the renewal of socialism after the collapse of communism; "[t]he more legal reforms [...] that socialism can look back upon in its search for traces of its own intentions," he writes in *The Idea of Socialism: Toward a Renewal*, "the more it will regain confidence in the realizability of its visions in the future" (Honneth, 2017, p. 74). It should also be noted that literature about precarisation in contemporary Sweden does not only look back on successful reforms, but also – in a way that resembles the dialectical vision of history described by Traverso – on the struggles that made these reforms possible. For example, in *Cykelbudet*, Teglund not only describes the political decisions that his relatives benefited from during the heyday of the Swedish model, but also their prehistory: the rise of the Swedish labour movement. He also explicitly discusses its relevance in today's situation. In

particular, this is done through a discussion of Per Olov Enquist's (1934–2020) novel *Musikanternas uttåg* (1978, published in English as *The March of the Musicians* in 1985):

> The March of the Musicians describes a turning point when something began to move. But it wasn't something that came from above. It was individuals who fought where they were: in their families, in their workplaces and in society. These people took big risks for little progress; they did it for their survival and they often failed. In time, however, they convinced more and more people to join them and gradually they created change. It wasn't for free. In the book a mantra that captures this premise is repeated: There is always something better than death.
>
> […] Even if the rise of the unions happened in another time, in a period of industrial flourishing and in a different political climate, it is a fact that it has been done once before in our country, and that it was done by people who had never done it before. (Teglund, 2021, pp. 112–113)

This passage frames the history of the labour movement not as a closed chapter, but as an unfinished process that remains relevant to the present.

Thus, the nostalgia for the Swedish model one finds in contemporary Swedish literature about precarisation could be described as nostalgia of the "progressive" kind advocated by Flores – a nostalgia directed toward periods of hope and solidarity:

> Nostalgia has an unparalleled capacity to coordinate large groups of people around shared rituals, memories, and desires. And by recollecting the best from the past and creatively reinterpreting it in light of today's needs, nostalgia can help us come up with new visions. […] If utopia were actual, however briefly and at a local scale, it is also a live possibility for the future, something concrete and achievable. *If we lived like this once, we could do it again.* (Flores, 2025)

What emerges from the texts analysed in this chapter is precisely this: a form of nostalgia that is not oriented toward restoring a lost past, but toward mobilising its unrealised possibilities in the present.

Concluding remarks: Precarisation and the Swedish model

This chapter has argued that contemporary Swedish literature does more than merely represent precarity as a socio-economic condition. Rather, it often frames labour-market insecurity as a sign of a broader historical transformation: the perceived erosion of the Swedish welfare-state and labour-market model. In this sense,

precarity functions not simply as an empirical reality, but as a metonym for a shifting social order.

A key finding is that literature can play an important role in mediating the temporal dimensions of precarisation. While some texts juxtapose the present with an idealised past, thereby reinforcing a sense of rupture between two epochs, others insist on the coexistence of precarity and security in contemporary Sweden. This more nuanced perspective complicates narratives of irreversible decline and opens up a space for political agency, suggesting that the institutions associated with the Swedish model have not disappeared but remain unevenly accessible and, therefore, contestable.

In doing so, the works discussed here also foreground the political nature of precarisation. By linking labour-market insecurity to concrete policy decisions and institutional changes, they challenge the notion that precarity is an inevitable outcome of global economic transformation. Instead, they present it as a historically contingent and politically produced condition. This, in turn, allows literature to function as a site for political imagination, where alternatives can be explored – particularly through labour-movement politics.

The recurring invocation of the Swedish model inevitably raises the question of nostalgia. However, as the chapter has shown, this is not simply a matter of idealising a lost past. Instead, many of the texts engage in what might be described as a form of critical or progressive nostalgia, in which memories of past reforms and struggles serve both as a resource for understanding the present and as a basis for envisioning future change. In this sense, the literary imagination does not merely look backwards but mobilises the past as part of an ongoing political project.

Returning to the initial paradox – why labour-market precarity figures so prominently in a society long associated with stability and security – the answer proposed here is that its significance lies precisely in this contradiction. In the Swedish context, precarisation becomes particularly visible, and politically charged, because it emerges against the backdrop of a historically strong welfare-state and labour-market model. Literature captures and amplifies this tension, transforming individual experiences of insecurity into reflections on collective trajectories and possible futures.

More broadly, this suggests that literary representations of precarisation must be understood in relational and historical terms. Rather than reflecting universal or

homogeneous experiences, they are shaped by specific institutional contexts and collective memories. The Swedish case thus illustrates how literature can contribute to a more differentiated understanding of precarisation – not only as a condition of contemporary capitalism, but as a field of struggle over the meaning of past achievements and the possibilities of future transformation.

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Chapter 3.

Precaritised Children in the Norwegian Welfare State

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Norwegian author Ingvild H. Rishøi's novel *Stargate: En julefortelling* was immediately widely read after the publication in 2021.[1] The English translation *Brightly Shining* (2024) even turned the book into an international bestseller, particularly after it had been recommended by talk show host Oprah Winfrey to her American audience.[2] The novel follows ten-year-old Ronja, who longs for food, presents, and a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. She persuades her father, who struggles with alcohol addiction, to take up work as a Christmas tree seller. Before long, Ronja's sixteen-year-old sister, Melissa, must take over his responsibilities, and Ronja finds a way to assist her. After a series of imaginative yet desperate attempts by the sisters to keep the job, Ronja becomes gravely ill. Fearing intervention by the Child Welfare Services, the young protagonists avoid seeking medical help and instead hide under one of the Christmas trees. Readers understand that the sisters are about to freeze to death.

[1] The research presented in this chapter has been carried out within the research environment "Precariat, precarity, and precarious lives in (Post-) Welfare-State Scandinavian Literatures," which is funded by the Swedish Research Council (project-ID 2022-01839_VR).

[2] For the popularity of the book and the effect of Winfrey's mentioning it, see Wictorsen, 2024.

The story has often been read as a contemporary reworking of H.C. Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Match Girl*,[3] not least because of its subtitle: "A Christmas Story".[4] Perhaps its popularity, particularly as a Christmas gift, results from a desire to encourage a Christian ethos of compassion. But would this be enough to explain the huge appeal to masses of readers in our times? In general, Norwegian literature at the moment contains numerous similar novels and short stories about children and adolescents who live in precarity. Like Rishøi's Ronja, young protagonists in children's literature, young adult literature and literature for adults lack adequate resources for food and clothing, struggle at school, and are without a supportive social network. They face multiple challenges: they must endure their classmates' comments, return home hungry to an empty refrigerator, and, in many cases, assume responsibility for younger siblings. Rather than being characterised by a sentimental appeal to compassion, these texts seem to insist on realism in their choice of style.

Our claim in this chapter is that the resonance of texts portraying what we call *precaritised children* may stem from the insistence that poverty exists even within a nation widely recognised as a wealthy welfare state: Norway. In a Norwegian context, we think, Rishøi's novel is significant because it highlights an ongoing process of precarisation affecting parents and children and thereby forces readers to address questions of class. The children's precarious circumstances are closely linked to their parents' marginal position in the labour market: the parents are frequently employed in temporary positions or are unable to work due to long-term illness. At the same time, the portrayed children and young adults make considerable efforts to conceal their situation from representatives of the Norwegian welfare state, including teachers, doctors, and social workers.

The large number of precaritised children in Norwegian literature may appear paradoxical. Compared to other European countries, Norway has not seen much

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[3] Andersen's fairy tale is very popular in Norway and is often performed by school children in the form of a theatre play before the Christmas holidays.

[4] Rishøi makes extensive use of intertextual references. In addition to Andersen's tale, Astrid Lindgren's well-known children's novel *Ronja Rövardotter* (1981, published in English as *Ronia the Robber's Daughter* in 1985) appears particularly significant. In Lindgren's narrative, which incorporates elements of magic and fantasy, the child protagonist not only survives in the forest – while Rishøi's Ronja ultimately perishes under a tree – but also succeeds in transforming the political structures that shape her parents' lives. Rishøi thus highlights the stark contrast between the highly realistic world inhabited by her Ronja and the imaginative universe created by Lindgren.

poverty so far – with the particular exception of families with a migration background, who statistically fall behind "ethnically Norwegian" families when seen from an economic perspective. As Statistics Norway shows, many people with a migrant background experience precarity in Norway – manifested in insecure employment, higher rates of youth crime, and frequent intervention by the Child Welfare Services (Dyrhaug and Haugstveidt, 2024). Thus, in demonstrating the life of even ethnically Norwegian children living in precarity, these literary depictions are often experienced by readers as insights into lives that are otherwise not seen. We interpret these stories as counteractions against what we would call a public rejection of, or blindness to, the existence of Norwegian poverty outside the context of migration.

The existence of a Norwegian denial or even ignorance of poor people without a background of migration became evident in a recent debate sparked by a television documentary. Journalist and author Thomas Seltzer – well known for his work on disadvantaged communities in the United States – revealed in a documentary that even "ethnically Norwegian people" risk living in poverty.[5] The fact that those he interviewed experienced themselves as poor despite being employed was perceived as scandalous in Norwegian media: There is a broad trust among the population in the Nordic welfare state and a belief in its promise that people who work would be ensured a worthy life.[6] Seltzer's documentary, however, revealed the contrary. Reactions varied between outrage and denial. Thus, the idea of "Norwegian poverty" among those without a migration background, and even among those in work, appears to be hard to acknowledge (see also Reinertsen, 2025).

The discussion surrounding Seltzer's documentary further demonstrated that poverty in Norway is rarely framed as a matter of class. This is similarly reflected in Rishøi's response to readers who have sought to interpret *Stargate* through the lens of class. In an interview with the daily newspaper *Klassekampen*, she insisted that the family's central problem is the father's alcohol addiction, arguing that growing up

[5] Thomas Seltzer's documentary is called "Den norske fattigdommen." The first four episodes (season 1) were broadcast in August and September 2025.

[6] The Nordic model of the democratic welfare state builds on the principle that the citizens should work. Regular labour ensures social inclusion, dignity and self-respect, and stimulates production while it also guarantees health insurance, housing and family support.

with parents who struggle with substance abuse is a significant challenge in both affluent and disadvantaged households (Espevik, 2021).

We find such efforts to downplay the role of poverty and class striking. We contend that it is time to examine more closely the forms of precarity described by Rishøi and other contemporary Norwegian authors. In what follows, we analyse three additional works alongside *Stargate*, all of which foreground children living in poverty: Lars Ove Seljestad's *Snøen stryk ut alle spor* [The Snow Erases All Tracks] (2019), Agate Øksendal Kaupang's *Å holde pusten* [To Hold Your Breath] (2013), and Rishøi's short story "Søsken" [Siblings], from the collection *Vinternoveller* (2014, published in English as *Winter Stories* in 2019). Each of these narratives depicts children of single parents struggling to sustain stable employment.

Our analysis will be guided by the following questions: How do these texts represent precaritised children? And perhaps more specifically, ethnically Norwegian precaritised children? In what ways is the parents' relationship to the labour market decisive in shaping this condition? What role do the Child Welfare Services play within the narratives? While we might have included works that address precarity in relation to children and young people from migrant backgrounds – such as Zeshan Shakar's *Tante Ulrikkes vei* [Our Street][7] (2017), Oliver Lovrenski's *Da vi var yngre* (2023, published in English as *Back in the Day* in 2023), and Frode Grytten's short story "YNWA" in *Garasjeland* [Garage Land] (2020) – we have deliberately chosen texts that more explicitly foreground precarity among Norwegians without a multicultural or migrant background. Our aim is to demonstrate that contemporary Norwegian literature highlights the potential for precarisation across society, not necessarily as an effect of migration, but as a consequence of structural transformations within the labour market.

Norwegian specialties

Let us begin by observing that Rishøi's *Stargate* so far has not yet been studied systematically from the perspective of class. Rishøi herself identifies the father's drinking problem as the family's central challenge. However, a comparison with

[7] This is the translation used by the publishers of the Norwegian original (Gyldendal forlag) on their official website (https://agency.gyldendal.no/fiction/tante-ulrikkes-vei/p-10022592/). Other translations of titles of Norwegian books that have not been published in English are our own.

discussions of contemporary Swedish novels such as Susanna Alakoski's *Svinalängorna* [The Swine Rows] (2006) and Åsa Linderborg's *Mig äger ingen* [*Nobody Owns Me*] (2007) demonstrates that parental alcoholism has not prevented Swedish critics from reading these texts as belonging to the tradition of working-class literature.[8] On the contrary, Swedish critics have tended to interpret alcoholism as integral to the family's class situation.

This interpretative approach could also be applied to Rishøi. The novel contains several indications that selling Christmas trees – a seasonal occupation – hardly sustains the father's aspiration to maintain steady employment. He receives neither mittens nor other protective clothing from his employer, and the family itself lacks adequate clothing. The father explains to his daughters: "You have no idea how wet fir trees get in this weather," he said. "Unless you work with them, you've no idea." (Rishøi, 2024, p. 23) The physical hardship of standing in the icy cold selling trees to better-dressed customers, whose treatment he experiences as humiliating, renders the temptation of a warm pub (called "Stargate") and the company of (drinking) friends all the more understandable. The precariousness of this work is further underscored when Ronja's sister Melissa takes over her father's job: the company owner, Eriksen, is shown to exploit his employees (he forces Melissa to work before school and after school, being responsible both for opening and closing down the company's place; he threatens to close their place for breaks; he supervises the number of visits to the toilet) while fearing oversight from the authorities (in particular, he is afraid of being accused of child labour when he finds out that Ronja helps in selling goods). Eriksen generally offers poor working conditions and objects to Ronja's visits to her sister at work. These episodes clearly gesture towards a critique of nonstandard labour contracts, in line with Guy Standing's analysis.

In this respect, *Stargate* points to interesting aspects of developments in the Norwegian labour sphere over the last decade. Media reports about the exploitation of casual workers often focus on issues with hired workers from Poland or the Baltic countries.[9] While employers depend on these workers, they do not want to offer

[8] See readings of the novels in Magnus Nilsson's *Den föreställda mångkulturen: Klass och etnicitet i svensk samtidsprosa* (2010) and Åsa Arping's *Att göra klass* (2022).

[9] See for instance comments on the report *Labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe in the Nordic countries* (2013), that revealed the reluctance of Norwegian employers to guarantee security for

them the same work security as they would offer Norwegian citizens, stressing the need for "flexible" work contracts. However, other casual workers seem to face the same challenges, even while authorities are busy enforcing labour regulations.

Right now, it looks as if Norwegian researchers and journalists are uncertain about how best to interpret the current situation. While Standing (2011) and others have claimed that there is a growing tendency in other countries to replace regular work contracts with precarious ones – a thesis also criticised, for instance, by J. Choonara in *The Precarious Concept of Precarity* (2020) – Norwegian sociologists writing on developments in the national labour market remain cautious in their assessments. In *Løsarbeidersamfunnet* [*The Society of Casual Workers*], Line Eldring and Elin Ørjasæter point to challenges arising from gig work, involuntary temporary employment, staffing agencies, and time-limited project contracts in sectors such as the media and academia. Nevertheless, they stress that there has been no observable increase in these forms of employment since the 1990s (Eldring and Ørjasæter, 2022, p. 17).

Eldring and Ørjasæter are also explicit in their refusal to apply the term "precariat" to Norwegian casual workers. While accepting Standing's description of the negative consequences of nonstandard contracts, they reject his broader ideological framework as a basis for analysing the Norwegian labour sphere.[10] They argue that Norwegian employers still generally prefer long-term employment relationships. We agree that Norwegian workers continue to enjoy better conditions than those in most other Western European countries, not to mention globally (see also Standing's (2014a) own statements in his foreword to the Norwegian translation). Nevertheless, there are people in Norway who live in conditions of precarity – likely more than the public is willing to acknowledge, as suggested by Seltzer's television documentary and the subsequent debate, or by the interest in and reception of Rishøi's *Stargate*. One might provocatively argue that there is little appetite in Norway for admitting that problems with precarity exist – let alone a class called "the precariat".[11] One

Polish workers in the building industry (https://www.nrk.no/stor-oslo/mest-ulovlige-arbeidsforhold-i-oslo-1.11411196).

[10] For a critical comment on Eldring and Ørjasæter, see Haakestad, 2019.

[11] This does, of course, not mean that there are no publications at all on this field. For instance, the journalist Einar Haakaas (2017 and 2022) has written several books about different forms of unregulated work.

reason may be that the groups most affected by precarisation – such as care workers and construction labourers – remain largely invisible in the media.[12] Another lies in the enduring belief that the Norwegian welfare state compensates for precarisation. [13] This is expected at least to be the case for the ethnically Norwegian population.[14]

In literature, however, authors do portray workers employed by staffing agencies (for instance, Kristofer Dale's (2016) short stories), immigrants engaged in the unregulated labour market (Shakar, 2017), and "ethnically Norwegian" individuals on temporary contracts (as in novels by Skaranger (2021) and Seljestad (2022), or in Grytten's short stories (2016, 2020)). Alongside these depictions, one group frequently represented in Norwegian literature as falling outside the labour sphere consists of those suffering from various forms of illness. Such texts are typically examined within the framework of the medical humanities but are strikingly seldom read from the perspective of class.[15] Yet it is evident that their protagonists are unable to maintain permanent employment – arguably the most severe consequence of the illnesses described.

As Magnus Nilsson (2025) has recently pointed out, contemporary Swedish literature offers imaginations of how precarisation in society might be counteracted, including strong trade unions, traditions of family cohesion, and a robust welfare state. In our material, it is particularly relevant to consider how literature reflects

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[12] See Elisabeth Eide's and Tine Figenschou's (2021) research, documenting that those working in care institutions and construction workers are to a large degree absent from the media.

[13] According to Halvard Vike (2016), the persistent belief in a functioning welfare state must be understood as the outcome of the efforts of the grassroots bureaucracy. Frontline professionals – such as nurses, social workers, and teachers – continue to feel a strong obligation to address the needs of clients, even when under considerable pressure from municipal administrations to reduce expenditure. A combination of politicians' adherence to the ideals of welfare provision and the strong work ethic of grassroots bureaucrats has thus far prevented the collapse of welfare services. As a result, Norwegian citizens at large remain largely unaware of the threats to their continued existence.

[14] As Magnus Nilsson (2010) has shown, many problems of precarity in Sweden are not seen as class issues, because they are perceived through a "filter of ethnicity." This also seems to be the case in Norway.

[15] For instance, Sandra Lillebø's novel *Tingenes tilstand* [The State of Things] (2020) could be read as describing precarisation, since Sandra's sick mother cannot hold on to a job. However, readers have so far concentrated on studying the description of illness and how it affects next-of-kin (Nesby, 2022; Simonhjell, 2024). For the absence of the class-concept in Norwegian medical humanities, see also Tischmann (2022).

upon one of Norway's central welfare-state institutions, namely the Child Welfare Services. As indicated in the introduction, authors depicting the children of ill parents – such as Rishøi in *Stargate* – frequently also explore the role of this institution. The practice and organisation of the Child Welfare Services are regulated by the Child Welfare Act, which aims to "[…] ensure that children and youth living in conditions that may harm their health and development receive the necessary help, care and protection at the right time" and "contribute to ensuring that children and youth are met with security, love and understanding" (Lov om barnevern § 1-1). The content and rationale of the Act are further grounded in the Norwegian Constitution and the UN Convention on Human Rights, which together underline the recognition of children as actors with rights of their own.[16]

Nevertheless, research demonstrates a widespread fear of the Child Welfare Services among minority populations. Studies highlight how parents with migration backgrounds fear that the authorities will "just take the children" and perceive the institution as discriminatory (Fylkesnes et al., 2015, p. 87). While this research primarily addresses ethnicity, the families concerned may also be classified as low-income households: they are often single-parent families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Fylkesnes et al., 2015, p. 93). Their marginalisation is therefore shaped as much by class position as by cultural background. It is accordingly reasonable to assume that ethnically Norwegian people living in precarious circumstances may share the mistrust towards this welfare-state institution documented in anthropological research on migrant families.

In many respects, then, novels depicting children living in precarity address issues rarely discussed elsewhere, namely those concerning diverse processes of precarisation within the Norwegian welfare state. We argue, first, that parental illness and the consequent inability to maintain permanent employment directly expose children in these narratives to precarious conditions. Secondly, the very welfare-state institution designed to support such children – the Child Welfare Services – is often portrayed as their adversary. Because these children go to considerable lengths to conceal their precarious situation, their circumstances become even more difficult. In this way, processes of precarisation are accelerated rather than mitigated by the institutions intended to counteract them. Contemporary Norwegian literature thus

[16] See also Skivenes et al. (2014).

depicts precarious children as mistrusting "the state" (see also Standing, 2014b), in marked contrast to the broader trust in the welfare state that still characterises Norwegian society (Vike, 2016).[17]

Abuse and fatigue: The sick mother and her sons in Seljestad

Lars Ove Seljestad's short novel *Snøen stryk ut alle spor* (2019) opens with the image of a 12-year-old boy cycling along the edge of a Norwegian fjord. He feels acutely lonely: the other boys, all of whom own far better bicycles, no longer speak to him.[18] In the past, while his father was still alive, he had belonged to their group; now, living alone with his mother and brother, he is excluded. Despite the falling snow and his lack of a jacket, he has been riding his bike since leaving school. He avoids returning home, for the headmaster has given him a letter to deliver to his mother.

Gradually, it becomes apparent that the boy's central problem is that his mother no longer fulfils any role in the family – as he sees it, she has simply ceased to exist as a person he could rely on.[19] Previously, she ensured the boys went to bed, prepared meals, and washed their clothes. Now, as he observes, she does little but "party," withdrawing from the responsibilities of family life.[20] Although he still believes he loves her, it is as if she "has given up" (Seljestad, 2019, p. 11). [21] The boy feels he

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[17] This might be due to problematic institutional procedures. Randi Kroken has argued that there was a change in the organization of the Child Welfare Services in the late 1990s as a result of the wish to control expenses and to introduce more effective methods (Kroken, 2016, 180). This led to the experience of the social workers that their decisions for vulnerable children no longer address their clients' needs (Kroken, 2016, p. 184).

[18] By opening the novel with the picture of the poor boy out in the cold, Seljestad clearly writes his text into the tradition of working-class literature, where the child often becomes the symbol for the oppressed worker. For children in working-class literature, see Adolfsson (1995) and Nilsson and Mischliwietz (2011).

[19] Described in the language of the welfare state, one would diagnose her position as someone who has "dropped out," since she neither participates in the labour market nor within the household.

[20] This clearly means a change in the presentation of mothering in working class literature. In traditional working-class texts such as Martin Andersen Nexø's *Ditte Menneskebarn* (1917–1921, published in English as *Ditte, Daughter of Man* in 1921) or Ivar Lo-Johansson's *Bara en mor* (1939, published in English as *Only a Mother* in 1991), the women often fail to succeed with their projects. However, they are usually described as working hard for their children.

[21] All translations from Norwegian novels are our own, with the exception of Rishøi's two texts.

has assumed the adult role himself: he ensures that his younger brother goes to school, brushes his teeth, and finds something to eat.[22]

The novel alternates between the boy's thoughts as he wanders in the snow and the mother's perspective as she stands at the living-room window watching the snowfall. Her narrative reveals that she suffers from severe pain and has been diagnosed with fibromyalgia and Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome). Both conditions are characterised by intense pain and exhaustion, rendering participation in the labour market impossible. The mother receives a minimum benefit from NAV, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. This financial support allows her and her sons to survive, though only at the most basic level.

The mother reflects bitterly on her situation. She laments the unfairness of her life, insisting that "no one understands how tired she is" (Seljestad, 2019, p. 16). She believes her neighbours, with their "SUVs and their newly renovated villas" (Seljestad, 2019, p. 16), cannot imagine the difficulty of raising two children on so little money. Excluded from the community of other women, she turns to alcohol as her sole means of coping and socialising. The reader gains the impression that she cannot fully grasp the hardship her sons endure: her own suffering prevents her from caring for others. She feels particularly isolated in her conviction that, apart from her doctor, no one believes her; instead, she perceives a moralising gaze from those around her, who assume she simply refuses to work.

Meanwhile, her son struggles to conceal the family's situation. When the parents of his former friends ask why he no longer visits, he lies, claiming to have been ill – even though the boys themselves have excluded him. At one point, he almost confides in his former best friend's mother but realises that she does not truly want to hear about his home life. She appears relieved when he explains that he has merely been unwell (Seljestad, 2019, p. 30). The significance of this moment, in which the boy recognises others' reluctance to know his reality, is underscored by the novel's title. The metaphor – "The snow erases all tracks" – reappears in his reflection on his own face during the encounter: he believes he has learned to erase all traces of his circumstances, ensuring that no one he meets perceives the truth about his home.

[22] This is typical: often precaritised children are also parentified, i.e., they need to take care of their parents.

Since he assumes they do not wish to know, he decides they shall not know. The novel in this way stresses how the existence of a precariat is something the Norwegian population has difficulty accepting as a fact.

The boy's own primary motivation for "erasing all tracks" is his determination to prevent the involvement of the Child Welfare Services. As he reflects: "If the Child Welfare Services get to know how they are living at home, how it is with mother, she will lose him and brother. They will be taken away from her" (Seljestad, 2019, p. 34). He knows this outcome is likely, having once watched a television programme on the subject. Moreover, he has promised his dying father that he would take care of his mother and assume a paternal role towards his younger brother, and he therefore feels the need to shoulder responsibility himself. He shows no trust in others and mistrusts welfare-state institutions. This fits Standing's (2014b) observation that "the precariat" is typically characterised by suspicion and mistrust of "the state": whereas the proletariat's traditional antagonist was capital, for the precariat it is the state. Seljestad's novel implies that such an attitude is inherited by children growing up in precarious circumstances. Yet this scepticism produces further precarisation: the children's effort to conceal the absence of adult care only deepens their vulnerability.

Over the course of the narrative, the reader also learns that the mother's problems partly stem from abuse in her own childhood. She recalls, in fragmented memories, that she resisted her father's embraces and preferred to spend as much time as possible at school, avoiding her home when others rushed back to theirs. Yet her teacher never noticed her distress nor inquired into its causes. As a result, she never developed the language to articulate her experiences. The novel suggests that this silence may have contributed to the emergence of her illness and fatigue. Her diagnosis as chronically ill thus provides one form of answer to her suffering, but paradoxically it also compounds her difficulties, pushing her still further to the margins of society.

The novel concludes with the boy, whether by accident or design, losing control of his bicycle and plunging into the icy fjord. He had been dreading the moment when he would have to tell his mother about a conversation with the headmaster, who, following a misunderstanding with a teacher, had begun to express concern for the family's situation. Terrified of this potential exposure, the boy keeps cycling and refuses to stop. As in Rishøi's work, death ultimately removes the figure of the

precaritised child from view, erasing him in much the same way as the snow effaces all tracks.

Mental illness and doing sex work: A single mother and her daughters in Kaupang

In the opening pages of Agate Øksendal Kaupang's novel *Å holde pusten* (2013), the 16-year-old first-person narrator and her 10-year-old half-sister Emilie receive a visit from a representative of the Child Welfare Services. Having been warned by a phone call, they manage to clean the most important rooms in the house – the bathroom and the kitchen, as they decide – and dress appropriately in time. The caseworker attempts to talk with the girls and to determine their mother's whereabouts. The sisters, unsure themselves, fabricate a story about her having gone to a nearby shop to buy food. Fortuitously, their mother returns, joins them for tea, and the situation is temporarily resolved, postponing further intervention for several weeks.

The family's precarious circumstances stem primarily from the mother's bipolar disorder. She alternates between long periods of sleeping during the day and phases of intense partying and social activity. She has no permanent employment, and her income appears to derive partly from state support via NAV, partly from child maintenance paid by the narrator's father, and partly from transactional relationships with various men. The daughters have developed a coded language to cope with the shifts in their mother's condition. For example, when she enters a destructive phase, they say that "mother is in Baghdad," signifying that she is caught in an internal war. For the narrator, Emilie is the most important person in her life: she cares for her younger sister, ensures she goes to school, and even takes her to the dentist.

The novel unfolds as a series of small, fragmentary scenes portraying the narrator's life with her mother and Emilie, interspersed with episodes involving young men, her father, and former friends. As is typical of narratives told from the perspective of children living in precarity, the text offers little explicit reflection; rather, it presents moments of lived experience in the present alongside memories of earlier childhood. The narrator recalls a time when she lived with both parents, before their divorce following Emilie's birth, which raised questions due to her darker skin colour. She also remembers her friendship with Anett, a schoolmate who often invited her home. Gradually, however, her situation deteriorates, largely because of her mother's unmanaged illness and absence of other adults to assume responsibility.

The narrator's father, having remarried, shows little concern for his daughter from his earlier marriage, while her former friend Anett distances herself once the narrator begins relationships with older men. At school, a teacher initially supports her by encouraging her writing in Norwegian class. Yet this fragile encouragement is not sustained: eventually, the narrator withdraws altogether and ceases to attend school.

The reader gradually understands that the narrator longs desperately for intimacy and seeks love, most likely because she lacks it at home. When her mother cries and suffers during depressive episodes, the narrator begins to associate these moments with sexual desire. This leads her to continue seeing a boy who has dropped out of school and now sells drugs in the neighbourhood. She also confides in her friend Anett that she meets older men through online contacts. As a result, she is cast out by the girls at school. Her pursuit of sexual encounters may be interpreted, on the one hand, as a form of self-harm – a way to feel something in the face of pervasive numbness – and, on the other, as a confusion of the longing for love with the desire for sex.[23]

The narrator's sexual behaviour appears, moreover, to be shaped by her mother's example. The mother frequently brings lovers home, ensuring that her daughters both hear and see what occurs. At the same time, the narrator's own activities become widely known among young men in the neighbourhood, further complicating her situation. When, for example, boys working at the local supermarket attempt to abuse her, she decides she must give up her job there. In this way, the precarisation of the narrator and her sister is presented as the outcome both of their mother's inability to sustain employment and of what Lynette Finch (1993) has described as the "moralising gaze" – here enacted not only by adults but also by their peers.

As both the narrator and Emilie cease attending school, the intervention of the Child Welfare Services becomes inevitable. Several times they hide when the caseworker visits, refusing to open the door (Kaupang, 2013, p. 160). The narrator also learns from a classmate that the same woman has been looking for her at school: "There was a lady here looking for you. She talked to Thorbjørn [the teacher] in the staff

[23] When a boy she becomes acquainted with offers her help and gives her money, she thinks she needs to pay him back. She immediately offers to satisfy him sexually. This offends him. He really did just want to help her.

room, too" (Kaupang, 2013, p. 160). This makes her so uneasy that she hides in the toilet until the end of the lesson. Ultimately, the Child Welfare Services decide that she must move in with her father, despite the objections of his new wife, while Emilie is to be placed in temporary care whenever their mother experiences acute episodes of illness. The novel concludes with the narrator leaving the house she has shared with Emilie, unable to find the words to tell her younger sister that they are about to be separated. Thus, although the novel ends with Child Services taking care of the situation, the precarisation of the sisters has already caused severe health damage, both physically and mentally. Again, the situation of belonging to the precariat is conditioned by the illness of the caregiver, inevitably placing the children on the margins of society.

Feeling betrayed by mother: The life of siblings in Rishøi

In Ingvild H. Rishøi's short story "Siblings" from the collection *Winter Stories* (2019), the reader follows Rebekka, the teenage first-person narrator. She lives with her mother, a younger brother, and a younger sister. Each child has a different father. For brief periods their mother manages to sustain an ordinary life: holding down a job and caring for her children. Rebekka recalls, for example, when her mother worked in a bakery; during that time she was cheerful, responsible, and affectionate when returning home.

Rishøi draws a clear link between the mother's employment and her ability to maintain stability in other areas of life, particularly in relation to the children's wellbeing. Once her mother loses her job, Rebekka assumes responsibility: collecting her siblings from school and kindergarten, preparing meals, ensuring they have clean clothes, and putting them to bed. As in Seljestad's and Kaupang's novels, the protagonist's existence is marked by parentification, driven above all by the need to keep outsiders at a distance. This role is profoundly exhausting for Rebekka, who is simultaneously trying to complete her schooling and navigate her emerging love life.

The story opens with Rebekka running away together with her younger siblings. She feels unable ever to trust again, after discovering that their preschool teacher has contacted the Child Welfare Services: "And the same day she called children's services. She did," Rebekka recalls (Rishøi, 2019, p. 179). In her eyes, the children have thus been doubly betrayed: first by their parents, who cannot provide a safe and predictable home, and then by the professionals at school and kindergarten – in other

words, by the welfare state itself. For Rebekka, there appears to be no viable alternative, in either the short or the long term, other than to run away.

The mother's own understanding of the situation remains ambiguous. Her willingness to allow the Child Welfare Services to take responsibility for Rebekka may suggest a degree of trust in state institutions. Alternatively, it may signal a painful recognition of her own limitations and the belief that others might provide her daughter with greater stability. Yet from Rebekka's perspective this feels like abandonment. She experiences betrayal not only by her mother but also by the preschool teacher, her own teacher, and the Child Welfare Services. Her lack of trust fuels fear, which in turn intensifies her vulnerability.

In the closing sequence, the siblings receive assistance, but not from their parents or from official institutions. After a long bus ride to an area outside Oslo, they struggle through deep snow in search of a cabin Rebekka vaguely remembers. Eventually, they are picked up by a woman driving a car. While the younger children are grateful for this practical intervention, Rebekka – as the eldest – is preoccupied by its implications, fearing once again the consequences of depending on others.

> 'Do you understand what I'm doing?' I say. But she doesn't hear me, when I ask my voice is too soft. I put my hand on her arm.
>
> 'Do you understand what I'm doing?' I say. She nods.
>
> 'You're trying to take care of them,' she says.
>
> 'Are you planning to call someone?' I ask. She glances at me and then back at the road.
>
> 'No,' she answers. Then she shakes her head.
>
> 'No,' she says again. 'I hadn't planned on doing that.' (Rishøi 2019, p. 189)

This is where the short story ends. Both Rebekka and the reader may breathe a sigh of relief: the woman does not appear likely to notify the authorities. Yet the question remains: is this truly a solution? Can it be considered genuine help? Clearly not, at least not in the longer term. But what would constitute an adequate response to Rebekka's situation? Rishøi elicits profound sympathy for Rebekka's project, while simultaneously inviting critical reflection on the role of welfare-state institutions, which may exacerbate precarisation among those already living in precarity. The

reluctance to acknowledge, or even to accept, the existence of poverty among ethnically Norwegian people is mirrored in the attitudes of the adult characters themselves, who – whether consciously or unconsciously – overlook the children's vulnerable circumstances.

Conclusion: Short return to *Stargate*

Similar to Rishøi's short story "Siblings," *Stargate* explicitly stresses the importance of being employed. Ronja, the narrator, is only ten years old, yet she recognises from the outset that the central problem in their lives is her father's unemployment. She recalls that she enjoyed life more when he was in work: the family had food, he was cheerful, and they were able to go on outings and take part in weekend activities. During periods of unemployment, however, he spends his time drinking with friends at Stargate, the local pub; he returns home late and fails to prepare meals for his daughters. In one way or another, his drinking and his lack of steady employment are closely intertwined.

At school, the caretaker shows Ronja a note advertising a vacancy for a Christmas tree seller. The advertisement specifies that the applicant should be like this: "*You are: Conscientious. Responsible. Outdoorsy*" (Rishøi 2024, p. 7). Ronja's father does not match this description – indeed, he dismisses it as "a job for country bumpkins" (Rishøi 2024, p. 9) – but, given the family's desperate situation, he nevertheless accepts it. The fact that Eriksen, the owner of the Christmas tree business, pays him in advance suggests that he does not operate entirely "by the book"; this payment enables the father to continue drinking. His elder daughter then takes over the job, though she receives lower wages and must work before and after school. Eventually, Ronja herself becomes involved in selling the trees and even receives a commission on sales. The two children are portrayed as doubly vulnerable: not only because their father's employment is temporary and insecure, but also because they are compelled to assume his precarious work under even harsher conditions. The novel thus shows how a family comes to be part of the "precariat": their classed position is not the outcome of general changes in the labour sphere or globalisation, as Standing had argued, but is rather initiated by illness. The father's alcohol addiction leads to a precarisation of all family members.

As mentioned, Standing claims that the precariat is typically sceptical towards welfare state institutions. This scepticism becomes part of the plot in the Norwegian

texts studied in this chapter. Like the other texts we have discussed, *Stargate* demonstrates that when children lack adequate parental care, they attempt both to support one another and to maintain the household. But they also try to conceal their neglect from outsiders, fearing intervention by the Child Welfare Services. In *Stargate,* Melissa explains to Tommy – one of the other Christmas tree sellers who urges that Ronja be taken to hospital when she is seriously ill – "*Do you know what happens when people like us go to the emergency room? [...] child services stick their oar in and everything*" (Rishøi 2024, p. 148). In response, Tommy, himself precariously employed, attempts to help them directly.

Thus, while parental illness is the underlying cause of the difficulties faced by the children in the texts under discussion, the parents' inability to sustain permanent employment initiates processes of precarisation that further undermine family stability. Even when the Norwegian welfare state supports sick parents with a minimum amount of money, this is not enough to ensure a dignified life for them, and as a consequence, children are prevented from becoming confident and independent beings. In novels about sick parents and their children, Norwegian welfare-state institutions, such as the Child Welfare Services, are depicted as exacerbating these processes, despite their ostensibly good intentions.

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Chapter 4.

Precariousness, Precarity, and Precarisation in Contemporary Flemish Literature:

Negotiating the Global and Local in Poetry (Geert van Istendael), Prose (Christophe Van Gerrewey), and Theatre (Stijn Devillé)

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This chapter examines representations of precarity in contemporary Flemish literature. Through the work of Geert van Istendael, Christophe Van Gerrewey, and Stijn Devillé, it shows that literature can illuminate how precarisation – and the struggle against it – is shaped by local as well as global socio-economic and political dynamics. Belgium, or rather Flanders as a region within it, offers a particularly instructive case for tracing this interplay, exposed as it is to economic shocks originating well beyond its borders. Flemish literature, this chapter argues, offers distinctive insight into the cultural lives of social (in-)security, revealing how texts inscribe themselves in a transnational discursive field where experiences and concepts of precarity are negotiated and contested.

Experiences and definitions of precarity raise questions about social security: about who has, or should have, access to protection, and on what grounds. Answers to these questions tend to waver between particularism and universalism, balancing

local concerns against broader humanist and moral considerations.[1] In the tradition centred in the Anglo-Saxon world and associated with scholars like Judith Butler (2009, pp. 2–4) and Isabell Lorey (2015, pp. 10–14), it is customary to distinguish between 'precariousness' and 'precarity'. The former concept names the fundamental human vulnerability we all share, since we necessarily depend on others to survive and are therefore all exposed to some degree of social risk; the latter names the fact that, despite this shared vulnerability, social risks are distributed unequally across individuals and populations. Hence, while precariousness is understood as a general ontological condition of (human) life, precarity is a state of insecurity refracted by political, socio-economic and legal contextual factors, which vary from state to state. The rise of precarious and flexible labour is a notable example. While a surge of precarity has been observed in various, mostly post-industrial countries, national legislation has made this trend more pronounced in some than in others, leaving parts of the workforce less protected. The local organisation of work thus elicits different forms of precarity that in turn trigger specific forms of criticism and protest, with examples ranging from the Precarias a la deriva in Spain to the Yellow Vests in France and Belgium (see Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 95–101; Castel and Dörre, 2009; Nachtwey, 2018).

Precarisation, despite its international reach, is thus anchored in "national, geocultural, and historical contexts as well as institutional practices" (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 54). It is enforced by local policies that inflect precariousness in a specific manner. Precarisation is in that sense 'glocal', because it represents "a blend of the local and the global" (Roudometof, 2016, p. 403). Against that glocal background, the discourse of precarity also allows diverse socio-economic realities to be articulated in a shared critical language – one that connects precarity in a specific context with comparable trends and phenomena elsewhere. Anabel Casas-Cortés has described the discourse of precarity as a "toolbox" that authors and activists can mobilise to challenge the distribution of vulnerability and risk in specific contexts (2014, pp. 206–226). Axel Honneth has stressed that this kind of adaptability of social imaginaries is a prerequisite for igniting a collective struggle against social harm. He claims that "there must be a semantic bridge between the impersonal aspirations of a social movement and their participants' private experiences of injury,

[1] More on the different traditions and transnational migration of precarity concepts can be found in the essays collected in Choonara, Murgia, and Carmo (2022).

a bridge that is sturdy enough to enable the development of collective identities" (Honneth, 1995, p. 163). Honneth argues that social struggles need to establish and expand "networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of individual members of a community can be acknowledged" (Honneth, 1995, p. xii).[2] Literature can contribute to such identities and networks.

This chapter demonstrates the potential of literary texts to stage and negotiate the dialectic of the global and the local. In line with Honneth's views on the moral grammar of social struggles, this chapter demonstrates that literary works attempt to bridge individual and collective perspectives on precarity, often by explicitly referencing the moral arguments for social security. Belgium – and more specifically, Flanders – is analysed as a particularly instructive case study. Belgium's open economy makes it susceptible to global shocks from the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008 to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, its relative position in the periphery between France and Germany – two larger European centres of economic and cultural power – also makes it a space of exchange where competing perspectives on social security and precarity collide. Moreover, Belgium's intricate political structure further underscores the importance of attending to how local contexts interact with the international level. The chapter examines three works representing three literary genres: Geert van Istendael's social security poetry, Christophe Van Gerrewey's short story cycle *Work Work Work* (2017) and Stijn Devillé's social drama *Yellow Vest* (2019). Each of these deploys different literary and emotional strategies to intervene in the debate about precarity and precarisation.

Politics and precarity in Belgium and Flanders

Imaginaries of precarity and precarisation respond to events and policy changes that erode social safety mechanisms. In recent history, the financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008 has been a watershed moment: a global crisis that impacted economies and forced national governments – often under pressure from financial markets – to take drastic austerity measures. Yet both the exposure to risk and the political response varied greatly. For example, international financial institutions, most

[2] This understanding of social change, which traces concrete socio-economic demands to fundamental moral principles, resonates strongly with Butler's call for a more equal distribution of precariousness, which can be preceded by new modes of representation and perception that recognise the vulnerability of all human beings.

notably the so-called 'troika' of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, forced Greece to implement a far-reaching austerity programme once its national debt peaked in the aftermath of the crisis, triggering credit contraction and soaring rates on government loans (Kinsella and Kinsella, 2018, pp. 154–157). Belgium, by contrast, proved unable to take equally swift action in late 2011, when a similar scenario was feared to unfold as creditors grew concerned over national debt and public finances (Michielsen, 2017).

Belgium's inability to cut into social security expenditure as drastically lay in its complex political landscape. At the time, six political parties – the socialist, centrist and liberal parties of both the Flemish and Walloon regions – were locked in negotiations to form a new federal government. Only the pressure of soaring loan costs on the global financial markets ultimately forced the parties to conclude negotiations after 541 days. The resulting government, led by the Social Democrat Elio Di Rupo, gradually implemented an economic stimulus plan alongside a moderate austerity agenda geared toward budget balance, marked by cuts to social security and benefits (De Lobel, 2011). At the same time, the Flemish government, among other things responsible for cultural and educational matters, was already pursuing a similar moderate vision of budget equilibrium through austerity (Vlaamse Regering, 2009).

Following the 2014 elections, new coalitions at both the Belgian and the Flemish levels pursued outwardly neoliberal policies.[3] As an example of transnational influence, this course of action was often justified with references to Germany's socio-economic reforms of the early 2000s (Schlamp and Schult, 2010; Winckelmans, 2010) – a rhetorical move that ignored the fact that Germany had undergone "the greatest reduction in welfare services since 1949" and had seen a general surge in precarisation (Nachtwey, 2018, pp. 82–84). Belgium nonetheless envisioned measures aimed at making the state – to quote Bart De Wever, president of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), the largest political party – "live within its means". Liberal Prime Minister Charles Michel, whose proclaimed motto was 'jobs, jobs, jobs', saw job creation as the remedy for the economic and financial situation (Desmet, 2017). Together, the federal Belgian and regional Flemish governments

[3] The governments of the Walloon Region and the French Community, in contrast, took a left-centrist path, consisting of parties that vocally opposed the federal policies.

realised cuts to the state apparatus, reductions in social security schemes and benefits, cuts to the Flemish cultural-sector funding, an increase in the retirement age to 67, business-friendly tax reforms, the flexibilisation of labour, and stricter migration policies. Companies were favoured, whereas workers were exposed to more precarity. Politicians including Michel and De Wever propagated this agenda with rhetoric that echoed Margaret Thatcher's catchphrase that there was "no alternative" (Belga, 2014).

By Belgian standards, these new policies were drastic, and they sparked widespread social unrest, strikes, and protest initiatives by writers and artists. The actions by unions, which organised nationwide campaigns and demonstrations, were especially significant. Di Rupo's centrist government already faced union protest, but Michel's coalition met with even more forceful opposition. The so-called 'Hot Autumn' of 2014 was marked by a wave of protest from the left, both in parliament and on the streets (Truyts and Sokol, 2014). Protestors contested the claim that there was no alternative, pointing to France as a model for a more leftist approach (*Belga*, 2014). The artistic sector, meanwhile, was beginning to mobilise against the Flemish government's budget cuts to the cultural sector. In 2014, artists and activists Wouter Hillaert and Hugo Franssen founded 'Hart boven Hard' [Heart above Hard], a citizen's protest advocating a different political approach grounded in humanism, solidarity, and inclusion. Just as the government had drawn on international precedent, so did the protestors: they voiced solidarity with similar grassroots initiatives abroad and built connections with other protest groups, most notably Tout Autre Chose and the Yellow Vests in France, and activists in Greece (Hart boven Hard, 2025a; 2025b).

In other words, both the supporters and the critics of policies that increased precarity in Belgium displayed a 'glocal' orientation, which underscores that local and international developments are entangled. While political debates on precarisation left discernible traces in Flemish literature, protest movements have also proven fertile ground for engaged literature that challenges dominant views on precarity. The following sections show that authors have deployed a range of literary strategies in different genres to negotiate the dialectics between context-specific social realities, macro-economic trends, and moral concerns.

Social security poetry (Geert van Istendael)

In the aftermath of the global financial and economic crisis of 2007–2008, the General Christian Workers' Union (ACW), which has historical ties with the centrist Christian-democratic party then in government, invited Geert van Istendael to become their 'social security poet' and write a series of poems on the welfare state. Van Istendael also co-organised a campaign, in collaboration with both local branches of the ACW, aimed at raising awareness of the social security infrastructure targeted by austerity, both in and beyond Belgium. Combining education with entertainment, this project involved a poetry contest for children and one for adults in 2008–2009, inviting non-professional writers to reflect on what social security means for them. The laureates were published alongside van Istendael's own poems in the volume *Zoals je bent zal ik je schrijven* [As You Are, I Will Write You] (2009; hereafter GVI).[4]

Van Istendael, who had been active in the Socialist Union of Brussels in the 1970s and later established himself as a journalist, writer, and translator, is known for essayistic and literary writing on social issues. As an engaged, public intellectual, he aspires to serve as a moral compass for society (Dewulf, 1989; van Istendael, 2010, pp. 83–85). His poems on social security exemplify this ethos: the programmatic opening poem stages a poet who leaves the "velvet rooms" of his ivory tower to roam the streets. The lyrical subject sees beggars kneeling before "the God of Charity" who "is deceased", and he describes how sick people pray to a Goddess "called Solidarity," who is herself also fighting for her life in a profit-driven world. (GVI, p. 3) In just a few lines, the poem conveys a broader message about vulnerability and care, and about literature's role in reminding readers of core humanist values:

> The poet's fingers write riddles
> On the wrinkles, deaf ears, old hands.
> The dark gate awaits us, all of us.
> That is why we have to be tender, all of us,
> Tender for all of us. Tenderness is the name of our child.
> Come, put on his hat, close the buttons of his jacket,
> A cold wind is blowing. Above all, tell us the fairy tale
> That these times are hiding,

[4] All translations from Dutch (i.e., Flemish) into English are my own.

The beautiful story of Solidarity.
You know it better than the poets.
Talk to me about social security. (GVI, p. 3)

The poem connects personal experience with a universal ethical appeal, the lyrical self with the collective. Solidarity is reframed as the subject of a long-lost fairy tale that must be retold for its didactic function. In doing so, the lyrical subject seeks to broaden readers' ethical horizons and redirect the course where 'we' are headed, away from a world ruled by 'cold' self-interest.

Metaphors of warmth, comfort and age further emphasise this overall address to a diverse community, one that establishes itself through the poetry contest itself. The plurality of voices is visualised in the publication's design, which presents each poem in a different font. Both the content and style of the participants' poems are heterogeneous, reflecting divergent views and attachments to social security at the very moment it is challenged by the narrative of austerity dominating the public debate.

Remarkably, the imaginaries of social (in-)security offered by many young and adult poets alike hover around notions of universal morality that exceed Belgian, local or even individual questions of precariousness. When, for example, fourteen-year-old Pauline Cherlet evokes a child recovering from cancer treatment in hospital, she frames care in relation to experiences of difference and love: "Oh no, I am bald! / That is […] not normal, is it? / Mum, am I different? / No, darling, you are special" (GVI, p. 8). The next poem by seven-year-old Marijke Geuskens links state-led healthcare to vulnerability and a universal moral obligation of mutual care: "sick or healthy / even in the case of rubella. / poor or rich, / we are all equal. / we have to work together, / to keep discomfort for all / of us within limits" (GVI, p. 9). The poem deploys simple yet effective binary oppositions and enjambment ("for all / of us") to convey solidarity and emotion; it recognises our shared vulnerability as a basis for a moral appeal.

Positivity pervades most poems, which foreground themes of care and tolerance, sometimes in relation to alternate forms of communities. In "The World's House," Helena Dockx describes a poor African man performing hard labour in the field, thereby managing to "transform the field into a house of the world." There, people can find "a small piece of the world unknown to them before," which attracts ever-

larger crowds that decide "to never leave it again." (GVI, p. 10) Collective effort reduces the vulnerability of each individual. The poem ends on a hopeful vision of harmony and community. In contrast, other poems express melancholy and suffering. Nine-year-old Margeaux Ghesquière makes a universal statement: "war, crisis and bankruptcy / I don't understand / people are so stupid / they throw bombs / at each other / and all those worries / does all this also affect me? / tomorrow" (GVI, p. 13). The answer, which coincides with the last word of the poem, "tomorrow," is ambivalent: whereas the breaking of day can refer to a new beginning, it might also be read as a reference to the young poet's concern that she, too, could be hit by the horrors of war and crisis. In this way, she reminds the reader of their own ontological precariousness, echoing Butler's call for a just and equal distribution of social risk on the basis of the vulnerability we have in common (see Butler, 2009).

The poems by the adults cover a wide range of topics, forms, and registers. Here, too, ontological precariousness is a central concern that elicits moral reactions, discussed in relation to disease ("similar diseases / upset us notwithstanding / our provenience"; GVI, p. 18) and humanitarian crises at the European borders, which are only indirectly related to Belgian social security ("Lampedusa is here, / Raking at your goose bumps. / Don't be mistaken"; GVI, p. 27). In a haiku – like the fairy tale, a didactic genre aimed at reflection – Willy Cuvelier lends precarity the face of a poor, innocent child ("The poor girl – / her eyes caressed the doll / in the shop's window"; GVI, p. 19). Some poems discuss intergenerational care, linking individual memories and experiences with broader socio-economic contexts (GVI, p. 23). In a poem on mutual aid and community, Monique Snoeckx evokes a utopian place in the middle between the "welfare mountains," the "ego sphere" of economic competition, and the "deep valleys" of poverty and deprivation. This place, referring to the poem's moral message, also defines the author's own ethos of caring for the precarious:

> But in between mountain and valley smile the hills
> In soothing shadow and gentle light
> Where poets are mending the canyons
> The giant extends his hand to the dwarf
> People come closer, like words in a poem
> And bathing in warm colours of sloping love
> A heart's desire blossoms

Caring for one another
Isn't that a dignified outlook? (GVI, p. 22)

Again, the ethical appeal cannot be overlooked. All these poetic expressions recognise each individual's need for a worthy livelihood fostered by practices of mutual care, thereby conveying a broadly humanistic perspective. These poems on social security understand the individual subject as fundamentally reliant on others, and they evoke a notion of solidarity that extends beyond the purely Belgian context, encompassing people across social groups, generations, and borders.

In his own poems, van Istendael discusses the surge of precarity from a historical perspective, inviting readers to consider this development as an eroding welfare state that had temporarily held the ghost of inequality at bay. He voices a strong commitment to universal social justice:

We want to fight, together,
North and east and south and west,
Must, shall fight, together,
Yes, the children will sing,
Yes, the parents will sing for them,
Careless in security
Because of the big, large smile
Of solidarity. (GVI, p. 29)
Deploying metaphors similar to those of the contest entrants, his work conveys a general ethical message:
Who owns gold, hands it out. Who suffers cold, gets warm.
Everyone can understand:
There is enough, enough for rich and poor
If everyone gives and everyone can take. (GVI, p. 30)

Moreover, van Istendael conveys a call for action, foregrounding the principles of "prevention, harmony, equality, care," and insisting that "solidarity is not for sale" (GVI, p. 33). The danger of losing social security ignites the lyrical subject's will to fight and defend it. In a poem on the fundability of social security, this ethics of universal solidarity is translated in a proposal to redress tax-evasive policies specific to the Belgian tax system:

The question is: who will pay for this?
Everybody.
Really everybody. Including the fortunes
Fleeing to flourishing gardens
Offshore. It is a gross scandal
That great wealth forsakes its duty.
[…]
Hear the frail voice of a poem:
Ordinary and rich are standing in the same light. (GVI, p. 34)

This poem targets the "notional interest deduction" as an inequitable mechanism allowing international companies to deduct a notional cost of equity capital from taxable profits – a policy that has been criticised by activists and the European Commission alike.[5] Binary oppositions ("ordinary and rich") and strong, emotion-driven rhetoric ("gross scandal") further emphasise the poem's message. Overall, van Istendael aims at defending Belgian social security by reminding readers of the core humanist values it enshrines.

Work, realism and the short story cycle (Christophe Van Gerrewey)

While van Istendael's work on social security has to be read against the background of the ACW's defence of the welfare state in times of crisis, Christophe Van Gerrewey's novel *Werk werk werk* [*Work Work Work*] (2017; hereafter CVG) can be regarded as a literary response to government policies aimed at flexibilisation and reduced public spending after 2014. The book title is reminiscent of Michel's mantra 'jobs, jobs, jobs' (see above). Gerrewey – an architect and author well-versed in critical theory, currently lecturing at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne – has published several novels and a collection of essays about culture and politics. His work challenges the dominant political and socio-economic narratives

[5] For a short summary of a political debate regarding the Belgian tax system, see Truyts (2014). Furthermore, tax inspector and journalist Marco Van Hees – affiliated with the Belgian communist party PVDA/PTB – has published a study about Belgium as a fiscal paradise (Van Hees, 2013). An investigative committee of the European Commission revealed that Belgium's fiscal system facilitates widespread tax evasion (European Commission, 2015).

articulated in campaign speeches and party programmes. One of his targets is the neoliberal obsession with socialist policies that, according to Bart De Wever, "punish people who work hard, save money and do business, by means of higher taxes." Gerrewey reminds his readers that this view of taxation downplays its use for "public services" and "social protection" (Gerrewey, 2015, pp. 331–332).

Not only do Gerrewey's essays defend social security as a mechanism to mitigate social risk, they also offer insight into his concept of literature:

> Good literature tries to show with the help of language what it means to be alive – how we are allowed to live in certain circumstances (and at a specific juncture in history), how we have to live due to socio-economic pressure, and how we could live in ideal circumstances. (Gerrewey, 2015, p. 87)

Literature is characterised as "the serious imitation of everyday life" and the "depiction of an existence in its totality" (Gerrewey, 2015, p. 87). His understanding of fiction thus aligns with what Anna Kornbluh, here echoing György Lukács and Erich Auerbach, has called "composed relationality," that is, a mode of representing the world that enables readers to make abstraction from what is shown, to resist the status quo and imagine different forms of sociability (Kornbluh, 2019, p. 4). In doing so, literary form can unlock alternate social imaginaries, it can give rise to new possibilities for existence. Not unlike Kornbluh, Gerrewey finds this poetic ethos encapsulated in works by French realists such as Balzac and Flaubert. In Flaubert, Gerrewey appreciates

> the capacity to express the essence of daily life, why the latter is important, what threatens it, what can (possibly) make it exceed itself, and most importantly: how its experience can be shared with others on the largest scale possible. (Gerrewey, 2015, p. 91)

Conceived as a response to neoliberal policies after 2014, Gerrewey's *Werk werk werk*, a cycle of five long stories, maps this poetic tradition of critical realism onto a contemporary Belgian context depicted in recognisable detail. The stories are grounded in actuality through references to the terroristic attacks against Charlie Hebdo (January 2015) and Brussels Airport (March 2016), border controls and

safety measures, and the Syrian migration crisis (2015–2016).[6] Political current affairs, too, are woven into the literary texture, with references to Flemish nationalism and neoliberal policies, to De Wever's rhetoric of "no alternative" and of "living within its means" (CVG, p. 94).

The stories deal with everyday situations which demonstrate the consequences of abstract economic processes. Each story documents a gathering or conversation of the first-person narrator and colleagues, friends or family. The narrator appears explicitly in all the stories, which reinforces the cycle's internal coherence. He also shares critical opinions and judgments regarding the events and other characters, explicating latent connections between individual stories and experiences through the insertion of leitmotifs and cross-references. By revealing the similarities between individual experiences and shifting attention from the primacy of economics to "general wellbeing," the stories seek to counteract the forces of competition that isolate individual workers (CVG, pp. 118–119). Suggesting connections between precarious academics, cultural workers and impoverished business owners, *Werk werk werk* vaguely hints at the contours of an emergent social class – Guy Standing would label it the 'precariat,' Franco 'Bifo' Berardi the 'cognitariat.'

Gerrewey makes his readers aware of how the social fabric has transformed by foregrounding elements of 'becoming form' in literature – a form that confronts readers with the logic of market competition and acceleration pervading their lives. In this economy, every moment is reduced to its monetary value. To highlight this, each chapter begins with a to-the-minute precise indication of the time at which each conversation took place. Every personal encounter is limited in time, confronting the narrator with his "lack of sound and proper time management" and his inability to fulfil "a desire for contact and quality time" (CVG, p. 12). The temporality of quality time is at odds with an economic logic that quantifies time along with almost every other aspect of life.

All characters struggle to navigate this temporal regime. They describe their sense of unrest with unsettling metaphors of war and terror provided by the media coverage

[6] The narrator's story largely overlaps with the author's biography. Both are architects who experienced precarity in their attempt to pursue an academic career. Gerrewey argues that "literature [only] comes into being when the reader does not know whether what is written in a book or novel is real" (Gerrewey, 2015, p. 115). This epistemic uncertainty is a strategy to make readers reflect about how their real lives relate to the story world.

of current affairs (CVG, pp. 47, 110, 177): the subject must constantly be on guard and assess risks, impacting its capacity to make small and big life decisions. The ability to make choices seems to be entirely subsumed to the temporal regime of optimisation. Moreover, the first-person narrator feels "at least once a day" that he has made a "wrong professional choice." He "will not achieve a fraction of what is expected," yet "will be incapable of anything else." (CVG, pp. 30–31) This anxiety is a consequence of a neoliberal fixation on productivity, impact, and growth – a pattern of thought that has increasingly pervaded the academic and artistic sectors in which the narrator is employed.

Moreover, precarious contracts push employees into a constant survival mode, they can no longer contemplate alternative career paths: in a neoliberal world where individual freedom and subjugation coincide (see Lorey, 2015, pp. 13–15), the window to imagine a life beyond the immediate present is shrinking. The narrator discusses his own career as a series of missed opportunities and thinks of the "nightmarish vision of [himself] in later life – undetermined, undefined, but with a compelling presence – looking back with sadness on that crucial time when everything could have turned out differently than it did in reality" (CVG, pp. 30–31). His CV is, furthermore, inscribed in the global history of mankind:

> I felt my life was nothing more than a tiny part of a series of wrong choices that had begun millennia ago and would only end in a few millennia, and that far exceeded the limits of my life and of the existence of the human species. Tears almost sprang to my eyes because I knew with certainty that history had not ended at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of my adult life – so-called progress cannot be stopped, and behind our backs ever greater ruins are being created. (CVG, p. 35)

When the narrator links his biography with the history of mankind by claiming that "behind our backs ever greater ruins are being created" (CVG, p. 35), he alludes to Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History*. Benjamin's *Theses* discuss the entanglements of humanity, progress, and technology in a way that corresponds to Gerrewey's criticism of neoliberalism. Benjamin reminds us that so-called historical progress "only wants to know about progress in the field of nature control, not about the decline of society" (Benjamin, 2010, p. 148). *Werk werk werk*, too, focuses on how technological innovation and the organization of work erode individual freedoms. For example, the invention of the smartphone and teleworking catapult the worker back into a pre-capitalist "era in which free time did not exist, and in

which all people worked day and night because they lived at their workplace" (CVG, p. 192). Gerrewey demonstrates that present-day precarity, while facilitated by new technologies, is prefigured in the past, and that the welfare state only briefly provided an alternative for a world in which time is entirely consumed by labour.

More central to the novel's critique of precarity are the entanglements of global and local economies. These are first mentioned in the background story of the narrator, who describes Switzerland, his place of work, as the epitome of efficiency, while other countries are "making losses everywhere, struggling with public debt, refugees, crime, terror, austerity, greed, traffic deaths, prostitution, procrastination, drug abuse, delayed trains, unemployment, strikes, fascism, rapes, populism, famine, suicide, TV chefs, or pollution" (CVG, p. 22) – the absurdly detailed list produces an ironic effect. Gerrewey reminds us that the Swiss success comes at the expense of tax e3vasion elsewhere. As a safe haven for global capital, Switzerland represents a market logic of winners and losers that is, moreover, explicitly associated with Margaret Thatcher, in her capacity as a global icon of neoliberalism (CVG, p. 32).

The story about the narrator's father, whose pharmaceutical company was taken over by an American multinational, offers yet another perspective on the Belgian economy as embedded in a global market. He describes the increasing Americanisation and bureaucratisation of work processes due to a continuous "reviewing and assessing," urging employees to be ever more productive – an assessment culture that is, moreover, compared to student evaluations in universities (CVG, p. 78). The new bosses never show themselves, remaining anonymous, making it "impossible to fight with an open visor!" (CVG, p. 47). The company's leaders hide behind an opaque telephone and email system that renders it difficult to voice concerns or protest: "every time he got someone else on the line, so that he wasn't even sure, that Monday morning, whether he had previously been in contact with the two men in bland suits without ties who suddenly appeared in his office" (CVG, p. 47). In a passage reminiscent of Kafka, the father is unexpectedly collected by two men and taken to a place where he can learn about the American approach to work. When the company later makes financial losses, it is he who is blamed for not implementing the American rules swiftly enough, even though the real cause is the mismatch of American views and local Belgian work attitudes and practices (CVG, pp. 47–48). Especially the contrast between the United States, where the "lack of social security […] benefits productivity," and Belgium, with its labour

protection laws that support employees, stands out. Anecdotes about redundancies illustrate the pressure by multinationals to further deregulate labour. In the end, Gerrewey's characters are still powerless against such tendencies, which they only identify and criticise.

Gerrewey's work, in short, discusses precarious work from a transnational and historical perspective. His realist poetics not only depicts the effects of economic processes on everyday life but also uncovers structural similarities between individual cases, allowing readers to extrapolate and draw general conclusions about precarisation.

Performing transnational resistance (Stijn Devillé)

Protest movements against precarisation are often situated in relation to international and historical examples. When, in October and November 2018, the gilets jaunes started demonstrating against the soaring cost of living and the growing inequality in France, protests quickly spilled over to Belgium. Here, the Yellow Vests took aim at Michel's neoliberal government – not always in a peaceful way. During a roadblock on 11 January 2019, a truck hit a protestor, who died on the spot (Paelinck et al., 2019). This incident was the main source of inspiration for *Geel hesje* [Yellow Vest] (2019; hereafter SD) by Flemish theatre maker Stijn Devillé, who has engaged with protest movements throughout his oeuvre. His play *Groupe Diane* (2016), for example, had staged far-left terrorists in Belgium against the backdrop of economic crises and social malaise in the 1980s – another period marked by austerity and precarisation. In an interview with Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*, Devillé talks about the similarities between the 1980s and 2010s:

> The rhetoric of austerity has been around for some time now. Once again, we hear that there is no alternative. At the same time, faith in politics continues to decline and new protest movements are springing up everywhere. The question now is: what direction will these movements take in the future? Will they continue to protest peacefully, or will they resort to violence once again? (Tielens, 2017)

His play *Geel hesje* continues this critical work. It premiered on an industrial site near Leuven during COVID. Devillé conducted extensive research and found inspiration in French authors like Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis, who wrote autobiographical texts about working-class childhoods in poverty. Other sources

included philosophies of protest and revolution, documentaries on the international ramifications and history of the movement, as well as interviews with its members. In doing so, *Geel hesje* not simply documents a local event in Belgium; it offers a cross-national imaginary of precarisation and protest. In the afterword to his play, Devillé brings into memory the movement's beginnings. It all started when Priscillia Ludosky, fired at a bank and unable to pay her gas bills, set up a Facebook petition that went viral. Many recognised themselves in Ludosky, as was the case for an almost simultaneous video post by Jacline Mouraud who testified of the difficulties to combine several part-time jobs to survive. Protests spread, and the Yellow Vests were born.

Devillé argues that the Yellow Vests can be regarded as a constructive form of protest. Their actions prefigure a solidary community beyond social groups. For Devillé, the yellow vest is a metaphor for the working poor, as a piece of clothing that makes the person who wears it extremely visible, as the symbol of an emerging class embracing all victims of neoliberalism across sectors, including the artists who suffered the budget cuts in the cultural sector (SD, pp. 145–146). Actor Kris Cuppens, who played a leading role in the play, voices his sympathy toward the movement and its demand for social recognition:

> I put on my yellow vest as soon as the cuts in the cultural sector were implemented. I mean that literally: I wore a vest during the protests in Brussels. To show that we are in the same boat as those people who are never heard in our society. (Bougard, 2020)

Against this background, Devillé's play recounts the aforementioned incident when a trucker tried to evade a barricade, ran over a protestor and committed hit-and-run. The events of the play take place on election day following the fall of the government over migration policy, which stirred political polarisation. A melange of "workers," "truckers," "part-timers," and people "struggling to pay the bills" set up a blockade at a gas station (SD, pp. 15–16). Other participants include "families / who spent their last 5 euros / to take the bus / to take part in the blockade / because they want / politicians to listen at last" (SD, p. 70). The demonstrations target austerity and deregulation, which is regarded as the root cause of their problems. They frame the protests as a struggle for recognition by means of peaceful protest, "without violent acts / no fights with the police […] respecting everybody's safety" (SD, p. 73). One of the protesters expresses her desire to be recognised as follows: "so look at me / I am here / I am here too / I exist / I want to be seen / I want to be heard / look at me

/ it is the first time / people are watching / the news / is watching us / politicians are watching us" (SD, p. 79). To legitimate her strife for recognition, she invokes the ideals of the French Revolution, which the establishment has betrayed (SD, pp. 80–81). In the meantime, state and police respond with violence, exacerbating an already escalating situation:

> there are no leaders
> among the vests
> we are all
> one group
> like a family
> and then they command
> suddenly
> a charge
> to scatter us
> the cops by horse
> and he got something
> in his face
> straight in his eye
> Jesus
> I couldn't do anything
> you are healthcare professional
> you think –
> yes
> and you can't do anything
> since then he
> only became more frustrated
> more radical (SD, pp. 57–58)

Devillé further personalises the confrontation between protestors and establishment, by making a yellow vest the antagonist of his own son who joined the police. Narrating social conflict as a difficult father-son relationship is a simple yet effective strategy aimed at eliciting an emotional response in spectators, facilitating empathy and recognition generally lacking in society. In addition, the play contains (real-life) voices of reporters describing the events on the radio, which gives more insight on

how the protests are perceived by the broader public. Here, too, the lack of recognition and indignation are the most important source of frustration: "the press has ridiculed us / on tv / the news and so on" (SD, p. 73). The play depicts not only the impact of austerity measures on individual (groups) of citizens but also an ensuing sense of abandonment and distrust towards government and police. Alienation causes frustration, anger and revanchism:

> where are the cops
> when you need them
> that truck ran
> over one of my best mates
> then I go after them
> and I stop them
> that is comradeship
> that is responsibility
> that is justice (SD, p. 32)

A friend of Robert invokes general moral principles such as justice and solidarity to legitimate his desire for revenge: "robert stood up for me / when they were going to take away my disability allowance" (SD, pp. 33–34).

However, the play also investigates the circumstances of the incident, allowing the audience to sympathise with the – female – culprit and truck driver. She explains how Robert jumped on the vehicle's bumper, trying to smash the front window. She was "exhausted" after her long shift that started at 4 am and her journey from Toulouse to Belgium, thinking "of nothing else but her children," while her ex is, moreover, trying to obtain sole custody (SD, p. 61). Furthermore, she juggles "three jobs" to support her family, even though she still "cannot afford" to pay her heating bills (SD, p. 77). Fatigue is intensified by shame, as she feels responsible for her precarity. Even though she admits fleeing the scene where she hit Robert was a mistake, her version of events sheds a more nuanced light on her situation. Objectively, she shares the concerns of the protestors. However, she claims the opposite: "the vests / should be on our side," that is, they should not prevent those who want to work from doing so (SD, p. 62). In the play, precarious workers disagree about the course of action and about whom to target with the blockades. There is no consensus among the precarious, there is no class unity. The truck driver even

renounces the protests, because the latter would chase away international employers, might negatively impact the job market, and worsen her personal situation. She thus echoes the government's rhetoric of 'jobs, jobs, jobs,' which the yellow vests discard as a false pretext to dismantle social protection schemes. The main message of the play is, then, that the success of social movements and struggles against precarisation hinges on cross-sector and even transnational solidarity:

> we will have to do it together
> the french
> the belgians
> the dutch
> the germans
> together
> one week
> two weeks
> three weeks
> we need a clear strategy
> now we are just doing something
> n'importe quoi
> unstructured
> but choosing one target
> together / at the same time
> […]
> we win
> by being legion
> we win
> because of our numbers (SD, pp. 110–111)

The ending of the play shows a movement in transformation: the phase of attracting awareness has come to an end, but "the next step" and the future of the Yellow Vests remain unclear (SD, pp. 112–113).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how contemporary Flemish literature engages with precarisation by navigating tensions between the universal and the particular, and

the global and the local. It has shown that precarity is not only a material condition experienced by individual subjects but also a discursive and imaginative construct – one that literature is equipped to reflect and interrogate. The three case studies demonstrate that literature plays a crucial role in representing and reconfiguring experiences of socio-economic insecurity. Literature functions as a space where ideology, critique, and also affect intersect, inviting readers and audiences to reflect on the relationship between individual and collective forms of precarisation and protest, as well as on the normative and moral assumptions underpinning socio-economic views and policies. Moreover, the chapter has illustrated the importance of close reading practices attentive to how literary texts respond to (and intervene in) specific socio-historical contexts and debates on precarity, while simultaneously referencing international pretexts and examples. Ultimately, these texts, and their glocal dimensions, make clear that literature is not a passive mirror of social reality, but an agent in the ethical and symbolic struggle over how that reality is represented, framed and transformed across historical and geographical contexts.

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Chapter 5.

Precarization, Literary Practice, and Solidarity in 1970s West Germany:

Working-Class Women in Marianne Herzog's Reportage *Von der Hand in den Mund* and Vera Kamenko's Autobiography *Unter uns war Krieg*

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In sociological and historical scholarship, the argument has been made that in the global history of capitalism processes of precarization and conditions of precarity constitute the "standard" (Breman and van der Linden, 2014, p. 920) rather than an exception, even if the forms they take vary historically and geographically according to specific political, social, cultural, economic, or legal contexts. As Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden (2014, p. 920) argue: "The real norm or standard in global capitalism is insecurity, informality or precariousness, and the Standard Employment Relationship is an historical phenomenon which had a deep impact in a limited part of the world for a relatively short period of time."

Yet even during this time – often given as roughly the third quarter of the twentieth century, yet different for different nation-states – when a capitalist regime characterized by the combination of economic growth, welfare state policies, and the standard employment relationship reduced the danger of precarization for the populations of Western societies, not all social groups were equally protected. Isabell Lorey (2015, p. 36) indicates as much, when she points to how mostly the normative worker – usually male, white, and skilled – was protected by this compromise

between capital and labor, but less so women and "abnormal, foreign and poor" people.

Against this background of the history of precarity and the socially distributed risk of precarization in postwar Western societies, this chapter looks at two texts published in the second half of the 1970s in the Federal Republic of Germany, and thus during a time when economic growth and the standard employment relationship first began to come under pressure there (Nachtwey, 2018, pp. 10–11, 41). However, my concern is not with how literary texts engage this development with respect to the normative worker. Rather, I focus on the precarization of working-class women at the time, as it is traced in *Von der Hand in den Mund: Frauen im Akkord* (1976, published in English as *From Hand to Mouth: Women and Piecework* in 1980), a montage-style reportage written by activist and author Marianne Herzog, and depicted in *Unter uns war Krieg: Autobiografie einer jugoslawischen Arbeiterin* [There Was War Among Us: Autobiography of a Yugoslavian Worker] (1978) by Vera Kamenko, a so-called guest worker with whom Herzog collaborated on her book.[1] These texts can serve as resources to better understand the heterogeneity, and stratified nature, of postwar capitalism in West Germany with respect to the precarious working and living conditions of (migrant) women workers whom Herzog (1980, p. 44), echoing Marx, calls "the reserve army for piecework." In particular, these texts add to debates about the "gendered nature of precarious work" (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 52) insofar as they put a different emphasis than this line of inquiry often does in contemporary research: They do not concentrate on "the affective labour of female migrant care workers" (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008, p. 52), but explore the interrelation between precarization and gender in the industrial workplace, including the presence of female migrant workers in factories.

The chapter's first section traces how precarity comes to the fore in these texts as a historically and socially situated condition related to, first, the systematic precarization of working-class women in postwar West Germany, which resulted from them being positioned as unskilled workers, and, second, the crisis of global

[1] Both texts have been translated: *Von der Hand in den Mund* into Danish (1977), Dutch (1977), English (1980), and Italian (1980), and *Unter uns war Krieg* into Danish (1980). Unless otherwise indicated, I am using the English translation of *Von der Hand in den Mund* in this chapter, while all translations from *Unter uns war Krieg* are mine.

capitalism in the 1970s. It also addresses how Herzog's writing shows working-class women as an internally differentiated group whose members are affected differently by precarization due to various factors, including whether they came to Germany as guest workers. Taking a cue from Magnus Nilsson (2024, p. 42), who argues that "literary representations of precarious work enter into dialogue with literary, political, etc. discourses" and that "literary meaning-making is conditioned by the specific economic, ideological, etc. conditions in the sites of literature where it emerges," the second section discusses how Herzog relates wage labor in the factory to her precarious working conditions as a writer, and how she thereby highlights the left-wing literary counter-publics that enable her authorship. Pursuing the interrelation between the literary representation of precarity and the contexts of literary production further, the third section analyzes the texts' depiction of solidarity and resistance as well as its aesthetic form, and it situates Herzog's political literature in second-wave feminism and the literature of the labor movement.

In the West German context, Herzog's and Kamenko's books precede by three decades the emergence of precarization and precarity as an analytical and political vocabulary, and as a topic of literary studies that often focuses on contemporary literature in this respect. Taking a historical perspective allows us, for example, to discuss how literary representations of precarization relate to the history of political and social movements. Crucially, this approach enables us to examine which genres and modes of writing predominated in literary engagements with precarization in different moments of literary history. If we note the predominance of autofiction in contemporary German literature that deals with questions of precarity, and its coincidence with the marginality of documentary writing (Schaub, 2024a), the 1970s provide a different picture: As the texts examined here indicate, documentary writing, and other factual genres such as autobiography, were much more important in the 1970s when autofiction emerged as a response to their alleged hegemony (Schaub, 2024b). As I can only suggest here, a comparison between these phases in literary history may allow us to ask to what extent different genres and modes of writing depict precarization differently: Is the autofictional novel better able to negotiate the personal and emotional effects precarization has, while the reportage is better suited to document collective conditions of precarization in the industrial workplace, but less well-suited to trace its effects in the space of the family?

My analysis focuses on *From Hand to Mouth* and Herzog's contribution to *There Was War Among Us*, and thus on documentary writing, while I discuss Kamenko's autobiography mostly in the first section. A today largely forgotten activist and writer, Herzog was born in 1939 and grew up in the German Democratic Republic, where she trained as a bookseller.[2] After settling in West Germany in 1961, she studied, worked as an intern in a protectory for girls, and wrote radio reportages. In 1968, Herzog helped to form the Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frauen (Action Group for the Liberation of Women), which challenged patriarchal structures in the students' movement and played a crucial role in starting second-wave feminism in Germany. She was arrested in 1971 as a member of the terrorist organization Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction) and found guilty of attempted robbery and the falsification of documents. After being released from prison two years later, Herzog worked in the metal industry, with her employment options limited by her criminal conviction. Yet even before this time, she had worked as a pieceworker when Marxist students and activists went to the factory to agitate:

> [In 1969,] I joined a group of Marxist-Leninists in the Proletarian Women's Centre [in West Berlin], and together with eight other women I went to work in the factory. We had sat together on a course and read *Wages, Price and Profit* by Marx, and whenever we asked the lecturers a question about working conditions today they had nothing to say. We wanted to know what conditions were like for women in factories, and what factory work was like. (Herzog, 1980, pp. 153–154)

In the passage, Herzog expresses her belief that contemporaneous working-class reality was barely publicly visible and that many left-wing activists were blind to it. Made possible by Herzog's time in factories, *From Hand to Mouth* was credited by English socialist-feminist historian Sally Alexander (1980) with "begin[ning] to fill a void in our knowledge of capitalist production" (p. 8) due to its focus on women positioned as unskilled workers and on "the sexual division of labor" (p. 15), which made women not just doubly exploitable as waged and reproductive, or care, workers, but also placed them in a lower structural position in the labor market than male workers.

[2] On Herzog's biography see Kraft (1998).

Working-class women and precarization in 1970s West Germany

Herzog's reportage, which spans the time from 1970 to 1976, is a montage of autobiographical testimony, historical and contemporary written documents, job ads, photos, descriptive and analytical passages, statistics, as well as conversations with and reports by workers in the metal industry where Herzog was employed by such companies as Philips, Siemens, and Telefunken in Berlin and Munich. If the book's title *From Hand to Mouth* evokes a precarious life in which the money earned is just, or barely, enough to live off and if its subtitle *Women and Piecework* ties this condition to gender and a specific organization of work, Herzog does not use the political and analytical language of precarization, precarity, and precariousness, as it only became widely used in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Yet Herzog describes in much detail processes that match contemporary understandings of precarization and its effects on everyday life and the psyche. The book thus provides knowledge about a historical form of precarization.

The reportage's subject is women pieceworkers who, according to the numbers Herzog provides, made up 70% of all women working in factories in West Germany at the time, while overall 94% of all women factory workers were "unskilled or semi-skilled" – unlike most of the men who were employed "as specialists" and "paid by the hour" (Herzog, 1980, p. 43). This gendered division into skilled male workers working in the standard employment relationship and unskilled female workers produced the precarization of women which allowed industrial capitalism in 1970s West Germany to flexibly manage its production demands. For these women, precarious work was indeed the "norm" (Breman and van der Linden, 2014, p. 920).

Often hired only for a short term, as the job ads in *From Hand to Mouth* document, and strategically fired before and re-hired after the holidays (Herzog, 1980, pp. 37, 88), women pieceworkers were regularly offered a wage that "I can't live on […], no one can" (Herzog, 1980, p. 101). Their "earnings [were] never constant," as they were paid by a piece-number, and they lived "in constant fear of not having a good average, because if she falls ill or goes on holiday […] she will not have enough money" (Herzog, 1980, p. 49). This work system was particularly disadvantageous for women, who had to do care work, and Herzog (1980, p. 102) evokes the physical and psychological toll the working conditions took on them: "In the summer your fingers may swell with heat so that the fitting, welding and punching slow down, but

that will not alter the piece-number. If you have a period and so are not able to work so fast, or if your children are ill, then that's your problem!"

Indeed, Herzog (1980, p. 97) relates how she and other women were laid off because of illness and depicts the exhausting attempts to find new employment, facing discrimination in doing so when, for example, asked whether she was pregnant. Herzog's reportage details "the super-exploitation that piecework is" and the "total mental and physical exhaustion it produces" (Herzog, 1980, p. 133). Herzog's earnings were so meager that she was only, but barely able to get by through pooling resources with the two women she lived with (Herzog, 1980, p. 75). This reflects a general condition: "A woman's earnings […] are not enough to enable her to live independently. This puts women workers among the most dependent and the most exploited" (Herzog, 1980, p. 132). In Herzog's case, solidarity among women had to make up for the lack of a wage one can live off; it provided a model of support different from the welfare state or the family able to at least partially and temporarily alleviate effects of precarization.

The situation of women pieceworkers was exacerbated as they were not represented properly, or even silenced, by the works councils of their factories (Herzog, 1980, pp. 112, 124–125, 129). In addition, when Herzog was released from prison in 1973 and entered the labor market, the oil crisis had begun to affect economies globally: 1975 even saw the hitherto biggest postwar recession in Germany and Europe (Nachtwey, 2018, p. 48). Women pieceworkers were particularly vulnerable to such an economic crisis, as Herzog (1980, p. 37) observes "the mass sacking of working women," which she situates in a longer history: "Women workers are the first to be sacked. This has always been so and is again in the present crisis. It happened before in the 1966–7 recession" (Herzog, 1980, p. 132). The precarity of women workers then comes to the fore in *From Hand to Mouth* as the result of their precarization through a gendered division of the labor market, their lack of workplace representation, and economic crisis.

Yet Herzog also differentiates women workers in multiple ways by demonstrating how differences in age, family status, the number of children, and care work influence the extent of their precarity.[3] Such concern with the heterogeneity of women employed in piecework also relates to the new transnational working class

[3] See, e.g., Herzog (1980, pp. 48–53).

that emerged in West Germany as the result of a state-regulated exploitation of asymmetries within the capitalist world-system via the channeling of labor migration between center and (semi-)peripheral regions. In West Germany, this took the shape of a guest worker program.[4] During West Germany's so-called economic miracle of the early 1950s, the Federal Republic of Germany entered into recruitment agreements with states in Southern Europe and Northern Africa to temporarily employ workers. When the oil crisis hit the world-system in 1973, recruitment stopped. Herzog's reportage traces the – compared to pieceworkers who are German citizens – even more precarious lives of female guest workers that arose from having their children in their home countries, being more stressed because of workplace pressure and surveillance, and suffering from particularly bad housing and living conditions.[5] Absent from Herzog's analysis of precarization, irrespective of the subgroup of women, is a tendency that we find in twenty-first century culture, namely to "imagine […] precarity ambivalently, that is, not only as vulnerability and insecurity but also as a gain in personal independence" (Plass, 2023, p. 6). This absence may well be a marker of the historical distance between the texts under investigation and today's discourse about precarity.

If, according to Rita Chin (2007, p. 5), the "ideal type" of the guest worker in German discourse was male and stood in the center of "a mantra of mutual benefit," Herzog complicated this picture by moving the precarious living and working conditions of migrant women into the spotlight. Even more than through *From Hand to Mouth*, Herzog did so by supporting the publication of Kamenko's autobiography, thus enabling an extremely marginalized woman to speak publicly. *There Was War Among Us* tells how Kamenko grew up in Yugoslavia and relates her rather typical journey from the Southern semi-periphery to Germany where she worked from 1969 to 1972. Born in 1947 in Sombor, a city in today's Serbia, Kamenko led a life in which precarity was the norm. Having grown up with foster parents, Kamenko, who did care work for a family in Belgrade for some time, was ultimately unable to find a job and decided to work in West Germany through the guest worker program. During the years she worked there on temporary contracts, she held five jobs and was laid off because of sickness, which meant that she lost her

[4] For the historical context, see Päthe (2013, pp. 22–37).

[5] See, e.g., Herzog (1980, pp. 44, 85, 103, 116–120, 142–145).

place in a company-owned residential home. The constant search for jobs and accommodation made her "tired of life" (Kamenko, 1978, p. 67). While she does not interpret her living and working conditions in a political or socio-analytical way – a dimension Herzog added to the book (Kamenko, 1978, pp. 103–104) – Kamenko (1978, p. 59) describes how she complained at one point about the relative privilege of German working-class women: "Shitty work. There were other female workers, almost all were Turkish […] One had to work a lot here and the boss was never happy. The German women stood around a lot and talked with each other and we worked. Nobody told them to work more. I wasn't stupid and pointed this out."

Because of her complaint Kamenko was fired. Ultimately, Kamenko's life turned nightmarish, as she was found guilty of inflicting bodily harm on her son Milorad, which led to his death. She was imprisoned from 1972 to 1976 and then deported. In her narrative, the death of her son at the age of seven is tied to her precarious living and working conditions: She is generally overburdened by the need to manage waged and care work, and she is unable to get help when her son is severely unwell because of her fear of German authorities and her abusive partner. After her return to Yugoslavia, she worked as a cleaner, which is related at the end of the book through a conversation that Herzog included in the chapters she wrote following her own journey in 1977 to meet Kamenko.

If *From Hand to Mouth* remains sparse in detail when it comes to the individual biographies of the migrant women and their reasons for coming to Germany and their experiences living there, *There Was War Among Us* complements the reportage as an autobiographical narrative of a migrant worker. Read together with *From Hand to Mouth*, it extends the geography of precarity beyond the center of the capitalist world-system and describes it through the voices of two precarious women positioned differently due to citizenship and educational background. Besides sharing experiences as precarious workers and prisoners, both Kamenko and Herzog respond to their living and working conditions through writing, a practice they understand as a way to share experiences and to make visible and possibly change the living and working conditions of women. If Herzog (1980) writes in *From Hand to Mouth* that "[i]f we are to fight this kind of work […], then we also have to describe it" (p. 37), Herzog quotes Kamenko (1978) in the last paragraph of her autobiography as saying: "It is my wish […] that other women also write down their

life, you understand. That [people] in Germany read, and later the women write, what they think about it and write down their life […] to find out how women live in Germany. It is also not great here [in Yugoslavia], but it is better than in Germany" (p. 111).

"Conditions of production": The precarious writer/worker

However, to respond to precarity through literary practice – to make it visible and no longer be "alone with my story" (Kamenko, 1978, p. 108) – requires finding the time and the financial means to do the writing. For Kamenko, who wrote most of her text in "uneven" (Kamenko, 1978, p. 7) German during her imprisonment, this meant to temporarily earn no money at all: She took "three unpaid vacation days" (Kamenko, 1978, p. 102) in order to work with Herzog on the manuscript, while the German author was able to collaborate with her since she had a literary stipend (Kamenko, 1978, p. 7). Although both Kamenko and Herzog can be understood as precarious writers and workers, since they were authoring texts, but also did precarious non-literary work to make a living, their positions differ: Herzog was a formally educated, published author who was, at least sometimes, able to depend on institutions that funded writers and had access to a publisher, neither of which Kamenko did.

All of Herzog's texts, including her memoir about her prison sentence *Nicht den Hunger verlieren* [Do Not Lose Your Hunger] (1980), reflect on literature's "conditions of production", as she calls them in a Marxist language in the foreword to *From Hand to Mouth* (Herzog, 1976, p. 6).[6] Therein, Herzog juxtaposes a two-paragraph description of the precarization of women pieceworkers during the economic crisis of the 1970s with a paragraph about the precarious conditions of her literary work:

[6] The English translation of the reportage omits the phrasing "conditions of production" and also the crucial last paragraph that I quote below in my own translation.

> My conditions of production were like this: I got money from the publisher for four and a half months. An advance. DM 800 per month. I had DM 500 fixed costs. The money was only sufficient for food because Ruth and I put our money together. Every day I worked 10 hours including the library and the household, often for a longer time. I had to rush in the library, at my desk, during the conversations with women because 4 x DM 800 run out quickly. (Herzog, 1976, p. 6)

The foreword's montage, a technique that characterizes the book as a whole, suggests resonances between the two work areas of precarious work that Herzog did. Her conditions of writing resemble the working conditions of the female pieceworkers that she describes: no standard employment relationship, the pressure to get a lot of work done in a short time, a longer than average workday, the need to also do reproductive work, pay that is not enough to live off, and no secure employment perspective. Several differences are obvious however: The money is paid as an advance and not tied to a piece-rate, while the physical strain that Herzog describes for piecework is absent in this passage.

If literature can function as a practice of responding to experiences of precarity and of creating knowledge about precarization, the documentary and autobiographical books of Herzog and Kamenko also shed light on the precarious working conditions of writers. They make visible that writers in most cases depend on non-literary work to make a living and to enable their literary practice and they show that literary work is "rather financially risky if it is not backed by a patron or supported by an inheritance" (Balint et al., 2021, p. 8). As Iuditha Balint et al. (2021, pp. 7–11) point out, this historical constant is "well enough known," yet the jobs writers do in order to get by and create literature are "barely thematized" by people of the literary scene like writers, journalists, or publishers: "Put radically: Jobs done just to make money [*Brotjobs*] keep the literary scene [*Literaturbetrieb*] running," and more often than not this means "precarious working conditions." To juxtapose, in a materialist critique of capitalist society, the systematic precarization of women workers with the precarious working conditions Herzog experienced as a writer is, arguably, a strength of her texts.

While the similarities that Herzog points out between the precarious conditions of writers and pieceworkers should not lead us to "conflate the precarity of artists and the precarity of workers" (Plass, 2023, p. 6), they, however, indicate that we should also not assume that the (allegedly) "decommodified character of artistic labor is fundamentally different from wage labor" (Plass, 2023, p. 6). This is not least so

because Herzog depends, for example, on speaking engagements on the radio (Kamenko, 1978, p. 7), and most writers in Germany today make more money by doing events such as readings than by selling books (Balint et al., 2021, p. 13). Therefore, the intersections Herzog traces should alert scholars to study how the precarious conditions in literary and other work intersect concretely in the life of writers.

If precarization takes its specific form depending on the historical time, location, or social group, a published literary response to precarity relates to a particular configuration of the literary public in which there may or may not be an interest in this kind of literature. In her books, Herzog repeatedly mentions how her publisher Rotbuch supported her literary work: From Rotbuch providing her with an advance and the opportunity to write in their office to conversations about possibly publishing Kamenko's autobiography (Kamenko, 1978, p. 99; Herzog, 1982, p. 137). That Rotbuch took an interest in the topics Herzog pursued, the documentary aesthetics she used, and her socialist-feminist perspective relates to the fact that this publisher was part of an infrastructure of publishing houses, bookstores, and even an Association of the Leftist Booktrade that emerged in the context of the students' movement and the New Left in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s in West Germany.

According to Uwe Sonnenberg (2016, p. 67), Rotbuch was "one of the most important publishers of the radical left after the revolts" of the students' movement. Within the first five years of its existence, it printed nearly one million books, supported documentary literature emphatically, and published, from 1973 onwards, works by Aras Ören, an important Turkish-German writer who wrote about guest workers, among other topics (Sonnenberg, 2016, pp. 322–324). It appears then that it was this kind of literary counter-public and its literary-political interests – documentary aesthetics, marginalized groups, materialist approaches – that facilitated the kind of writing about precarization that Herzog undertook. Moreover, similar left-wing publishers abroad enabled the international circulation of *From Hand to Mouth*, as it appeared in 1977 with Tiderne Skifter in Denmark and in 1980 with Feltrinelli in Italy.

Solidarity, resistance, and literary form

If Alexander (1980, p. 33) writes in her introduction to the English edition of *From Hand to Mouth* that "[t]here is no conscious collective resistance, only occasional solidarity or momentary escape through dreams" among the pieceworkers, this is only partially an accurate description of Herzog's reportage. Indeed, *From Hand to Mouth* describes many small interpersonal acts of solidarity: supporting another woman in her attempt to find work, alleviating someone's physical strain by massaging her shoulders, helping a co-worker out who does not manage to make her rate, assisting each other materially, or consoling worries about children and partners (Herzog, 1980, pp. 82, 108, 113). Moreover, the reportage relates small, concealed acts of collective resistance against the worsening of working conditions: When a rate-fixer came to the factory where Herzog worked, the women "all consulted with one another and […] decided to work slowly" (Herzog, 1980, p. 116) to prevent higher piece-numbers from being determined. Yet, as Herzog (1980, p. 117) also testifies, such resistance was hindered by the specific organization of work: "The individual pieceworkers are individually checked and their new piece-numbers are distributed individually. This makes it very difficult to fight collectively." Moreover, she writes: "I see how much we deceive, lie and notch-up piece-numbers which we do not achieve – but how little we are able to get away with it!" (Herzog, 1980, p. 108). Herzog's collaboration with Kamenko for her autobiography, through which they become personally close (Kamenko, 1978, p. 109), can also be understood as an act of solidarity, as the author helps someone to speak publicly who is not in a position to do so independently because of her social position. In a similar way, Herzog is a facilitator of working-class expression through the polyphonic nature of *From Hand to Mouth*, which, as a montage of different women's voices that Herzog collected through interviews and archival research, positions women workers to speak publicly. In Herzog's texts, literary practice becomes a way of representing and practicing solidarity.

This practice is nevertheless characterized by an asymmetric distribution of the power of literary expression. First and foremost, solidarity takes the form of advocacy here, as Herzog positions her writing as one that speaks for precarized female workers. Working-class self-expression in a more emphatic sense appears to be less immediate in these books, especially if one takes into account that Herzog's own position as a worker is ambivalent due to, among other factors, her educational

background. Herzog authors *From Hand to Mouth* and selects, organizes, and edits the materials therein, irrespective of whether they are historical documents, reports based on her conversations with workers, or contemporary writings by workers. She also edits Kamenko's German and provides her autobiographical text with an introduction and concluding chapters that frame Kamenko's narrative, influencing the readers' reception of Kamenko's voice and transforming *There Was War Among Us* into a kind of co-authored work. Both books thus oscillate between speaking for someone, speaking for oneself, and enabling someone to speak who could otherwise not be heard publicly.

While this tension relates, on the one hand, to social position and access to the means of literary publication, it also depends on the logics of different genres: While self-expression is pronounced in the autobiography as a genre characterized by the narration of one's own story in the first person singular, the reportage tells about someone else and relates information about a group that is socially and culturally different from the person writing the reportage and from its target audience. The acts of solidarity and resistance that Herzog depicts take place in a context where female pieceworkers, as pointed out above, lack proper representation by organizations of the labor movement, which limits their political agency.

The emphasis Herzog puts on the interpersonal level of such practices of solidarity and resistance and the way she describes her collaborative literary work with Kamenko as a close personal relationship can be seen in the context of second-wave feminism. For this movement, the politicization of personal relationships, and of the so-called private sphere, was crucial and its activists were skeptical of hierarchically structured organizations and strove for new kinds of self-organizing and political participation (Gerhard, 2009, p. 110, pp. 116–118). Second-wave feminism not only informed what Herzog took as the subject matter of her books – the exploration of how the precarization of women workers related to a gendered division of the workforce and the effects this had on women – but it also influenced what she depicted as solidarity and resistance.

Looking at Herzog's ambivalent depiction of the practices of solidarity and resistance among women pieceworkers – limited in design and efficiency, yet relatively pervasive, and necessary for getting through the workday and for experiencing interpersonal connections – may also help to "challenge an often-repeated argument in contemporary research, namely that, in general, literary representations of the

precariat are pessimistic" (Nilsson, 2024, p. 53). Moreover, through its structure, *From Hand to Mouth* suggests that political action can be, and in fact was, an answer to bad working and living conditions: After having documented the precarization of women and their small acts of resistance and solidarity for sixteen chapters, the third-to-last and fourth-to-last chapters of *From Hand to Mouth* document strikes by female workers that took place in Germany in 1973 and 1974. While reminding the reader of these more large-scale and confrontational forms of political resistance, the book also calls for (literary) activism when it asks readers to report about precarization and political actions against it: "Report, from the city where you live, about layoffs of women workers. Report about demands, resistance, and strikes of women workers!" (Herzog, 1976, p. 89)

If *From Hand to Mouth* traces collective agency and experience, its montage creates a polyphonic text that moves between individual and collective experiences of women working in the factory and in the household. Significantly, this montage does not remain limited to the contemporaneous moment of the 1970s, but links it through texts and images to earlier points in history, and especially to the first third of the twentieth century, that is, a time in German literary history when documentary aesthetics, working-class reality, and left-wing literature had intersected as well. Herzog does so through intertextuality, as two texts from the cultural production of the labor movement follow the reportage's foreword. The first one is the song "Bread and Roses", in the version by James Oppenheim and Martha Coleman, that was published, for example, in 1915 in an anthology edited by Upton Sinclair about "the literature of social protest" (Sinclair, 1915). The song takes up the demands of female textile workers, often Italian immigrants, who, in 1912, striked in Massachusetts. Like Herzog's reportage, the song speaks of working-class women's resistance and insists on the universal importance of their struggle: "The rising of the women means the rising of the race" (cited in Herzog, 1980, p. 39). While the inclusion of this text reminds readers of a political tradition of working-class women, the song's title also links to West Germany's second-wave feminism: One of its first and more well-known groups was called Brot und Rosen (Bread and Roses), and Herzog was temporarily affiliated with it (Kraft, 1998, p. 158). The second intertext is an excerpt from the book *Mein Arbeitstag – Mein Wochenende* (*My Workday – My Weekend*) that the German Textile Workers Union published in 1930. It comprises 150 short testimonies that document working-class women's life in factories and the household by way of their literary self-expression, while an

afterword positions these texts as evidence for the need to improve proletarian women's living and working conditions and their political representation (Deutscher Textilarbeiterverband, 1930, pp. 217–227). Through montage and intertextuality, *From Hand to Mouth* makes visible constants in working-class women's history and thereby invites readers to see the precarization of female pieceworkers and their responses to it in this longer trajectory.

Concluding remarks

From the vantage point of today's critical discourse about precarity, *From Hand to Mouth* and *There Was War Among Us* can be read productively as texts about the precarization of female (migrant) workers in 1970s West Germany, about the ways in which literature was used to engage these conditions, and as texts that shed light on the literary forms that writers have historically adapted and developed to depict precarization. Yet, that Herzog situates her literary practice in the political history and literature of the labor movement also indicates that she understands the female workers she depicts as part of a heterogeneous working class and its long history of struggle and literary expression, rather than as part of a class called "the precariat." After all, at the time when Herzog wrote, the precariat – as a socio-economic, cultural, and potentially political group in Guy Standing's sense (2011) – had not yet entered the discourse about precarized labor, even if some of the conditions associated with the precariat can already be observed in Herzog's and Kamenko's texts.

Instead, through the literary-historical perspective that this article has taken, precarization comes to the fore as a process that is characteristic of the living and working conditions of marginalized groups *within* the working class; and *From Hand to Mouth* and *There Was War Among Us* complicate cultural and political imaginaries of a unified and homogenous working class. Contemporary literary analyses of precarization should then be careful not to project the idea of the precariat back onto historical epochs when imaginaries of the working class still predominated. Moreover, my analysis of Herzog's and Kamenko's texts suggests that it might be their very focus on marginalized groups within a broadly conceptualized working class – that is, a working class not limited to the male, industrial, and urban worker – that allows for perceiving and representing precarization as a structural dimension of the postwar capitalist regime in West Germany and elsewhere that was

characterized by economic growth, the standard employment relationship, and the welfare state.

If this capitalist regime began to slowly come under pressure in West Germany from the end of the 1970s onwards (Nachtwey, 2018, pp. 10–11, 41), then precarization can be considered as one aspect of what historian Philipp Sarasin (2021, p. 34) calls, quoting Michel Foucault, "a short history of the present," a phrasing that means "that a segment of the past is examined from the perspective of the present and serves to shed light on our current issues and problems." In this sense, Sarasin argues that some crucial developments that would come to shape the present of the 2010s and 2020s, at least in the Global North, first began to become more dominant in the 1970s, as this decade witnessed the emergence of identity politics, diversity discourses, and neoliberalism. While precarization itself does not play a significant role in Sarasin's account, Herzog's and Kamenko's texts indicate that we may in fact analyze the intersections of precarization, diversity, and the literary imagination in the 1970s in order to understand how our present came about and to reflect on what distinguishes literary imaginaries of precarization in the 1970s and in the present. The working-class literature written during the 1970s thus provides us with a literary archive of experiences and imaginations of precarization that we can use to understand not only the 1970s in more nuanced ways, but also our present moment.

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Chapter 6.

Precarity and Middleclassness in Spanish Postcrisis Fiction

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Javier López Menacho's *Yo, precario* – published in 2013 and reissued, with two new chapters and an epilogue, in 2022 – is widely regarded as one of the most important Spanish literary works after the 2008 financial crisis. Jesús García Cívico calls it "a recent classic in Spanish-language nonfiction narrative, one of the key titles for understanding the early decades of the 21st century" (2022). Enric Llopis, on the left-wing website *Rebelión*, describes it as "a raw, life-affirming chronicle – though laced with plenty of humor – of the labor underworlds inhabited by the lumpen […] a personal experience, yet steeped in collective and social grit" (2013). Claudio Moyano Arellano even goes so far as to describe the novel as "a prime example of a compelling current trend in Spanish-language fiction, which connects with the social realism of the mid-20th century and aims to bring the protagonists' material conditions into the literary realm in order to subvert them – understanding the fictional text as one of many arenas in which battles can, and should, be fought" (2021, pp. 124–125). Moyano Arellano evokes the Marxist idea of the ideological unconscious – the set of internalized assumptions and values that shape perception and interpretation without conscious awareness.

What these critics tend to overlook is how middleclassness shapes both López Menacho's text and their interpretations of it. By middleclassness I mean not only a socio-economic position but also a set of assumptions, affects, and cultural expectations tied to belonging – or aspiring – to the middle class. What, then, lies behind the title's declaration *Yo, precario*? Does the author give voice to a narrator who accepts his precarious condition, or does he rather point to a form of

astonishment – or even bewilderment – on the part of a protagonist who, having worked his way into the middle class, suddenly finds himself precarized? I take this book to be a characteristic expression of the widespread sense among Spaniards of having been betrayed by a promise – one that many readers can recognize as a product of the country's historical trajectory.

Placed within this wider landscape, *Yo, precario* also exemplifies what I call *postcrisis fiction*: works that do not assume the crisis to be resolved, but instead reconfigure and question its effects in order to make sense of the evolving social, cultural, and political landscape. Postcrisis fiction, in other words, critically explores these transformations rather than merely documenting the aftermath of the crisis. While not all postcrisis novels take this class position as their focus, many center on young protagonists whose downward mobility is experienced less as material deprivation than as a betrayal of class-based expectations. As David Becerra Mayor notes, however, these narratives often construct "a discourse grounded in nostalgia for the world – and for their place in that world – that has been left behind," depicting a class that "realises that, despite having done their homework, despite having upheld their end of the bargain, they have not received the promised reward of well-being" (2021, p. 100). Cristina Sanz Ruiz similarly states that postcrisis fiction "has focused on depicting the transformation of a class that went to bed believing itself middle class and woke up precarious" (2024, p. 146). The sheer number of novels addressing themes of crisis and precarity – at least 66 by 2018, according to Sanz Ruiz's annotated bibliography (2019) – attests to how central this experience has become in contemporary Spanish literature. There are examples of working-class precarisation – notably in the growing current of female autobiographies, which read class in combination with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and regional differences – but they remain relatively scarce. As a result, we shall see that the dominant narrative remains one of middle-class disorientation, marked not only by economic instability but by the collapse of long-held assumptions about social mobility, meritocracy and security.

This chapter examines the position and function of *middleclassness* in Spanish postcrisis fiction, with special attention to how it shapes depictions of precarity. Focusing in particular on López Menacho's *Yo, precario*, I argue that the predominance of middleclassness as a lens has decisively framed both the production and reception of narratives of precarisation – an imbalance that reflects the specific

contours of Spain's recent socio-economic history and the legacies of its literary tradition.

The economic crisis of 2008

The collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 triggered a global financial crisis whose effects were particularly devastating in Spain, where years of speculative growth had made the economy especially vulnerable. Spain's economic expansion in the years leading up to 2008 was built on a fragile foundation of cheap credit and real estate speculation. Low interest rates following Spain's entry into the European Economic Community in 1986, combined with rapid growth and generous lending, fueled a construction boom and a nationwide housing bubble. Property was seen not only as a safe investment, but as a path to prosperity – and this belief was actively cultivated through state policy.

The promotion of homeownership was not simply a neoliberal strategy, but also part of a longer ideological project. As early as 1959, Francoist housing minister José Luis de Arrese famously declared (although the pun in the original is lost in translation), "we do not want a Spain of proletarians, but a Spain of proprietors" (Rodríguez López, 2022, p. 129). This alignment of citizenship with ownership would shape Spanish economic and social policy well into the democratic era. Between 1995 and 2007, nearly seven million homes were built, property prices tripled, mortgage credit expanded elevenfold, and domestic consumption increased by 90%. As Rodríguez López puts it, about 80% of the population, owning at least one home, was drawn into "a festival of easy credit and real estate capital gains" (2022, p. 101). Foreign investors – particularly from the UK and Germany – also contributed to the housing frenzy, purchasing second homes in coastal regions and inflating demand further (López Hernández and Rodríguez López, 2010).

When the bubble burst, the consequences were profound. Housing prices collapsed, unemployment soared, and entire sectors of the economy unraveled. By 2012, overall unemployment had reached 26%, while youth unemployment approached 50%. In fact, by 2010, almost 90% of job losses were among people under 35, effectively leaving an entire generation without stable employment prospects (Jornet Somoza, 2019, p. 110). At the same time, banks collapsed under the weight of bad loans, requiring a European Union bailout that imposed strict austerity conditions. Public spending was slashed across essential services such as healthcare, education,

and welfare, deepening inequality and pushing more people into poverty (Fanjul, 2023). Evictions became a daily occurrence. In response, grassroots movements such as the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH, or Mortgage Victims Platform) emerged, demanding the protection of housing rights and challenging the political consensus that had allowed the crisis to unfold.

The precarisation of the middle class

The Spanish job market was already quite precarious in the 2000s, following the industrial reconversions of the 1990s, and remained heavily dependent on the construction and tourism sectors. Compounding this were a weak welfare state and the increasing precarity of both reproductive and intellectual labor. Moreover, many of the country's social structures still bore the influence of the Franco dictatorship, shaping the labor conditions of the time. What changed after the 2008 economic crisis was that precarisation began to affect the middle class to a significant extent as well:

> The decade since the onset of banking turmoil in the United States has been a true breeding ground for precarity and extreme situations for millions of its inhabitants. In addition to the unemployment rate already mentioned, there has been a general precarisation of working conditions – drastic wage reductions, an increase in temporary contracts, a loss of union bargaining power, the facilitation of low-cost dismissals, and more – giving rise to a new impoverished sector of the middle class that threatens, in the long run, to resemble the working poor already present in other countries. (Jornet Somoza, 2019, p. 111)

While the most vulnerable sectors of society were, as always, the hardest hit by the economic crisis, Rodríguez López points out that "the middle class in crisis manifests itself first and foremost as a political crisis" (2022, p. 357). This idea is further illustrated by the fact that the middle class in crisis became visible across a wider spectrum – not only in politics but also in mass media, academia, and fiction – precisely because it is the middle class that occupies key positions in these spheres. As a result, the crisis of the middle class was not just an economic issue but one that resonated profoundly in the realms of public discourse, intellectual thought, and cultural production, amplifying its impact on Spanish society as a whole.

The origins of the Spanish middle class as we know it today can be traced back to the final years of Francisco Franco's dictatorship. Rodríguez López (2022, pp. 18–

19) states that the Franco government considered the Spanish middle class to be its great success, not just a social achievement but above all a political project with deep roots. This project emerged from key developments like urbanization, industrialization, infrastructure creation, and administrative reforms – transformations that the Francoist intelligentsia dubbed "developmentalism." These changes extended beyond simply fostering a sense of prosperity. At its heart, the project aimed to steer Spaniards away from what Francoists saw as their natural inclinations toward anarchy, rebellious individualism, and historical distrust of authority and institutions. Another key success of Francoist reformism, which enabled it to shape the Transition, was its ability to frame this project with a convincing ideological narrative. Developmentalism left a lasting image of Franco and his regime as a temporary dictatorship – one that may have overstayed its time but was seen as both necessary and successful. This narrative suggests that Franco's dictatorship saved Spain twice from division, driven by class conflict and the threat of a communist revolution. The first time, in the 1930s, it did so through military force and ruthless, systematic repression. The second time, more subtly but permanently, it achieved this through economic prosperity, the eradication of mass poverty, and the creation of a strong middle class, now supposedly resistant to socialist, communist, or libertarian movements.

These lessons left a lasting imprint on Spanish society. The middle class, viewing itself as the buffer between the owners of the means of production and the working class, had placed its trust in an unspoken social contract: if they upheld their role in ensuring the continuity and stability of a liberal, capitalist democracy, they would be rewarded with the benefits of progress, well-being, security, and consumer prosperity (Becerra Mayor, 2021, pp. 99–100). In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, however, the unspoken agreement of progress in exchange for systemic security was broken, despite the middle class having upheld its end of the bargain. This rupture led to what Hernández refers to as the "desanclaje" [detachment] of the middle class from its previous social and economic foundations. Work was the clearest arena where these situations of detachment manifested themselves. It was not just that younger generations, who had anticipated stable employment similar to that enjoyed by their parents, had been forced to let go of those expectations; many middle-aged blue- and white-collar workers also saw their sense of security vanish. Both groups found themselves in a state of transition – aware that the world had changed, but

uncertain about the direction in which they were heading (Hernández, 2014, p. 262).

This detachment contributed, at least in part, to the emergence of what was initially known as the *indignados* movement, inspired by Stéphane Hessel's short pamphlet *Indignez-vous!*, published in 2010. This movement later evolved into the 15th of May Movement, *Movimiento 15M*, and eventually became known simply as 15M. The movement began on May 15, 2011, with a peaceful protest in Madrid that quickly escalated into a larger movement. After the initial demonstration, a group of protesters occupied Puerta del Sol, one of the city's – and the country's – most iconic public squares, which became the heart of the movement, as protesters set up camps and held assemblies to demand political change. The protest at Puerta del Sol inspired similar occupations across Spain, as citizens voiced their frustration with economic hardships, austerity measures, and political corruption. The square became a symbol of grassroots activism, with peaceful demonstrations calling for greater democracy and social justice. Alongside the age-old tactics of occupying public space in order to gather the masses, social media also played a vital role in organizing and sustaining the movement, allowing protesters to communicate quickly and mobilize large numbers of people. The movement's slogans, such as *Democracia Real Ya* (Real Democracy Now!) and *No nos representan* (They don't represent us), captured the frustration with the political system and the demand for greater democratic participation. As we shall see, while 15M did not result in immediate legislative changes, it significantly raised social and political awareness, contributing to long-term shifts in how citizens engage with politics and activism.

The 15M movement was also a middle-class mobilization, led primarily, though not exclusively, by those between the ages of 20 and 35. Rodríguez López underscores that the powerful image of a lost future for the country's youth, symbolizing a broader societal crisis, made it hard for (middle-class) society to look the other way. Although the demonstrators focused on specific issues like austerity, democracy, and the failures of the old political class, their presence in the streets represented a much deeper problem: the breakdown of the traditional promises of progress, state fairness, and merit-based rewards. The precarious job market, especially for university graduates, became a powerful metaphor for this failure. The movement gained widespread support, even from parts of the media and old elites, making repressive

responses difficult and helping to fuel its success. In this sense, the middle-class narrative became, once again, generalized for society as a whole:

> The recognition that the political crisis manifests itself above all as a "generational crisis" – that is, as a crisis of the country as a whole, rather than a social crisis in class terms, for example – once again highlights the central role of the middle class and its monopoly over the political sphere. Framed in terms of a "lost generation," the crisis initiated by 15M is thus understood as a crisis in the reproduction of the middle class. (Rodríguez López, 2022, p. 360)

The 15M movement also fostered significant political awareness, primarily among those directly involved in protests, assemblies, and meetings, and secondarily among those who followed its impact through the media, arts, and entertainment. Some longed for what they perceived as the stable, prosperous, democratic, and steadily progressive world before the crisis, particularly the notion of a state that provides protection and remains politically impartial, a system of representation untainted by corruption, a functional welfare state, a less aggressive and more humane capitalism and, most importantly, the reestablishment of a functional meritocracy that maintains the illusion of "equal opportunity" through transparent and objective standards of hard work and effort (Rodríguez López, 2022, p. 370). Many others came to recognize that the notion of a more harmonious precrisis society was nothing more than an illusion: it was simply an *imagined democracy* in the narrative that the middle class told itself (Rodríguez López, 2022, p. 370), a "display of the marvels of progress in Iberian (post)modernity" (Álvarez Blanco and Gómez L. Quiñones, 2016, p. 14), a "psychoanalytic fantasy of normality" (Delgado, 2014), and a "nostalgic idea about how well we lived before the fall of Lehman Brothers" (Becerra Mayor, 2013a). David Becerra Mayor (2021, pp. 33–34) goes so far as to interpret it as an event in Alain Badiou's sense, which "is defined by its capacity to name the void and fill it with plenitude, to fill it with truth," and to "change names, pierce established knowledge, and transform codes of communication and regimes of truth," producing a new subject, capable of "sustaining the process of constituting the new regime of truth." Many even questioned the word *crisis*, stating that the political and economic elite framed the crisis as a temporary phase that citizens had to endure to return to previous prosperity, using this concept to justify panic-driven economic policies, austerity measures and irreversible privatizations; one of the most common slogans in the 15M demonstrations was precisely *No es una crisis, es una estafa* (It's not a crisis, it's a scam) (Martínez Fernández, 2020, pp. 23–24). In short,

the 15M movement sparked a widespread awakening that profoundly reshaped political and intellectual discourse in Spain, challenging established narratives and prompting critical debates on the country's socio-economic structures.

Postcrisis fiction

This political awakening extends significantly into the realm of Spanish fiction.[1] David Becerra Mayor argues that precrisis Spanish novels unconsciously reflected the ideology of advanced capitalism by replacing the system's more radical contradictions with conflicts that aligned better with capitalist ideals. In what he terms the "novel of non-ideology," these works stripped away political and social elements, instead portraying reality as if all conflict stemmed from the individual. By shifting focus from societal tensions to personal struggles, these novels inadvertently contributed to the creation of an imagined, harmonious, conflict-free world (Becerra Mayor, 2013b). However, the enormous social and economic impact of the crisis, along with the activism that emerged in the wake of the 15M movement, has triggered what Maria Ayete Gil (2023, pp. 71–72) defines as a *repoliticization* of literature: novels that focus on exposing the economic, moral, social, and political collapse – issues often rendered invisible by official narratives – and aim to reveal underlying causes, contradictions, and responsibilities. Political novels existed before 2008, albeit few and on the margins, and the prefix *re-* suggests that the crisis and the 15M intensified these already present tendencies.

Two hybrid texts, straddling the line between novel and chronicle, are early and paradigmatic (Rossi, 2021) examples of the rise of precarious literature: Javier López Menacho's *Yo, precario* [I, Precarious, 2013], which I study in depth below, and Cristina Fallarás' *A la puta calle: Crónica de un desahucio* [Kicked the Fuck Out: Chronicle of an Eviction] (2013). The former is a semi-humorous, resigned account of a series of ridiculously precarious jobs the author is forced to accept, while the latter is a cry of rage from a professionally established woman who first loses her job and then her home. Overall, 2013 was an excellent year for precarious or crisis literature. Rafael Chirbes' *En la orilla* (published in English as *On the Edge* in 2016),

[1] The term "Spanish" refers to the language rather than to the country as a whole, since there is a large number of novels published in Spain written in Catalan, Basque and Galician. A more accurate designation would thus be "Spanish Postcrisis Fiction in Spanish" but, for the sake of stylistic elegance, I use the conventional term. See Claesson (2022; 2024b).

a realist novel considered "la gran novela de la crisis" [the great crisis novel] (Rodríguez Marcos, 2013), cross-reads the construction boom, the corruption and speculation of the precrisis years with a wider moral decay in Spanish society, from the Civil War, through the dictatorship and the flawed transition to democracy, to today's neoliberal capitalism. Pablo Gutiérrez' *Democracia*, one of the most studied crisis novels, depicts the very real downfall of one middle-class man through a fragmented narrative that sometimes moves into mythological dimensions, involving both the intrepid child Leh-Bro and his master Soros, long before he became a bogeyman of the conspiratorial far right. Javier Moreno's *2020* is a techno-poetic dystopia set in a near future with parallels to the real 2020, and Rosario Izquierdo's *Diario de campo* [Field Diary], an autobiographical narrative that draws on the author's experience as a sociologist working with socially excluded women in Seville's impoverished neighborhoods. The following year saw the publication of another widely discussed novel, Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (published in English as *The Working Woman* in 2017), which connects middle-class labor precarity with mental health. In 2016, Julio Fajardo Herrero's *Asamblea ordinaria* [Ordinary Assembly] was published, a much less critically discussed novel that uses three parallel narrative threads to depict various precarious lives with remarkable conciseness and elegance.

2018 was another prolific year for precarious literature. That year saw the publication of Cristina Morales's *Lectura fácil* (published in English as *Easy Reading* in 2022), a monumental novel that critiques the heteropatriarchal system, state biopolitics, and conventional politics. Surprisingly for a novel with such radically leftist underpinnings, the most thorough anarchist critique of Spanish postcrisis society to date (Claesson, 2024a), it won the National Narrative Award, a prize usually given to works more aligned with official, consensual, or statist narratives. The same year brought Diego Sánchez Aguilar's *Factbook. El libro de los hechos* [Factbook: The Book of Facts], one of the most intelligent and imaginative novels about crisis-era Spain; Santiago Lorenzo's *Los asquerosos* [The Grimy Ones], about a precarious man forced to hide in rural Spain after injuring a police officer during a protest, which became a tremendous commercial success with over 150,000 copies sold; and Munir Hachemi's *Cosas vivas* [Living Things], an example of middle-class work tourism and at the same time one of the few novels addressing the exploitation of animals and plants in industrial agriculture. The subgenre of precarious novels continued to produce excellent texts. In 2019, Javier Mestre's *Fábrica de cuentos* [Story Factory] was published, focusing on precarity in journalism by an author who had already

explored similar themes in his 2014 novel *Made in Spain*, about the failed attempt to create an example of humane capitalism. In 2020, Elena Medel's *Las maravillas* (published in English as *The Wonders* in 2022) came out, a harrowing novel about the body and money across two generations of women from the same family.

The writers of postcrisis fiction largely reflect middleclassness, a fact that significantly conditions their portrayal of the crisis and the experience of economic uncertainty. Most of the authors discussed here could be characterized as middle class – by education and expectations if not strictly in economic terms – which shapes not only their thematic focus but also their narrative style. In contrast, Spain has a comparatively less consolidated tradition of working-class narratives, a difference that distinguishes it from countries like Sweden, with its rich history of working-class literature. While there are certainly notable exceptions in Spain, these remain isolated, failing to coalesce into a broader literary movement focused on the working-class experience. Middle-class values and experiences were framed as representative of the nation as a whole, overshadowing the narratives of other social groups, particularly the working class.

This focus on the middle class not only shaped the way Spain's social issues, such as labor struggles and economic hardships, were addressed but also influenced how they were represented – or, more often, overlooked – in literature, media, and politics. As a result, the working-class experience in Spain remains underexplored in cultural productions, limiting the visibility of narratives that highlight the realities of economic inequality and social justice. This gap has had lasting effects, reinforcing a national self-image that is primarily viewed through middleclassness, even in the face of growing precarity across all strata of society.

Like many narrators writing about their own precarity during this period, López Menacho has a solid academic background – "an undergraduate degree, a master's degree, and several specialization courses" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 17). The book follows a format typical of the postcrisis era: a blend of novel, reportage, and essay, with a tone that shifts from casual and humorous to resigned and indignant. It avoids a tone of victimization and includes pointed political commentary, but above all, it recounts a personal journey through a series of absurdly precarious jobs. During the months covered in the narrative, the protagonist works as a promotional mascot for chocolate bars, a tobacco machine auditor, a human billboard for a mobile phone company, and finally as an announcer during Spain's matches in the 2012 European

Championship, promoting a car brand. In this last job, each of the national team's games becomes a moment for reflecting on his own work situation and for contrasting "España" (as an idea) with Spain (as a reality): "España is as unbeatable on the pitch as its people are at displaying their misery. They'll celebrate the victory of a bunch of millionaires even though they can't afford to fill their mugs" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 170). Published at the height of the postcrisis period, when unemployment and job insecurity had reached unprecedented levels, the book struck a chord with widespread public sentiment (Cruz, 2013).

One of the book's most interesting aspects is its title: it serves as an emblem of an era defined by an antiheroic epic, while also prompting reflection on the position of the writing subject within a social, political, and existential context. In the epilogue to the reissued edition (2022), López Menacho explains his choice of title, noting that at the time, there was very little literature that addressed precarity directly. According to the author, the dominant voices were scattered chronicles and essays "signed by men in ties theorizing about precarious reality while barely knowing it" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 166). Meanwhile, precarious people were everywhere, struggling to make ends meet – people who, until then, had not found a voice to represent them:

> I wrote the book as a catharsis and to clearly identify what my precarity consisted of, and only mine: hence the title. Also because it sounded forceful and reminded me of the solemnity with which Robert Graves titled *I, Claudius*. That irony had something of a claim to the right to exist. The precariat tends to hide, try to go unnoticed, and feel ashamed of its very existence. Turning the tables seemed like a good idea. (López Menacho, 2022, p. 166)

The title is undoubtedly forceful and solemn, but in this case, it serves an anti-epic function: it is not the life of an emperor with a proper name, narrated in the first person two millennia after his death, but rather the story of an *I* that, in a sense, could be anyone – what is most personal about the subject is, paradoxically, also what is most universal. This positioning places the book in a complex and multifaceted relationship with the reader, inviting us to reflect not only on the precarious figure of the author – a subject with whom the reader may identify or from whom they may distance themselves – but also on the very precarity of the *I* in postcrisis times. Here, precarity refers not only to material or labor conditions, as illustrated by the narrator's absurd, low-paid jobs, but also to an existential

dimension: the fragility of identities and of the narratives that structure our relationship to the world and to ourselves.

Undoubtedly, López Menacho's book offers a direct representation of precarity in the postcrisis era. It portrays the kinds of temporary, poorly paid, and degrading jobs that people, lacking other options at the time, are forced to take simply to afford food and rent in an expensive city like Barcelona. This labor humiliation, especially in the book's early chapters, is tinged with humor and is clear from the opening line: "The first thing you have to do is strip down to your underwear" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 21). It is important to note, however, that the work the protagonist performs is not associated with the hard but socially necessary labor traditionally linked to the working class. On the contrary, almost all the jobs – except for a brief stint as a tobacco machine auditor – belong to the promotional sector, the final link in a chain that already functions as a marginal product of the capitalist system. In this sense, these jobs resemble what anthropologist David Graeber (2018) calls "bullshit jobs": roles that have no clear social purpose or meaningful utility, yet proliferate within an economic system that prioritizes image, performativity, and superficial productivity.

This lack of purpose extends beyond economic logic and affects the protagonist's self-perception. He feels ashamed of appearing as a mascot in shopping centers and resolves that "from now on I will work not only to pay rent but also to dignify this job" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 42). The appeal to dignity certainly draws on the legacy and rhetoric of labor struggles, but here it rings hollow: the work lacks any intrinsic social value that might transform its meaning in the eyes of others. Still, the very act of asserting dignity – however futile – points to the psychological and symbolic stakes of precarious labor. Despite recognizing the degradation, the protagonist also reflects: "I'm living through a moment in history that feels depressing but exciting, and at the same time, I'm learning my own limitations as a person. The uncertainty of not knowing what lies beyond tomorrow is, in a way, pure adrenaline, something that makes you feel alive" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 40). This ambivalence appears early in the book and reflects a broader tension that accompanied the shift away from the stable – if monotonous – employment characteristic of Fordism. In the early years of precarity, flexibility – today little more than a neoliberal buzzword masking the extreme insecurity of gig economy jobs – could still be perceived as something positive (Casas-Cortés, 2014, p. 210).

As the narrative progresses, however, the narrator-protagonist begins to recognize the process of precarisation and its impact on him at an existential level, in the novel's most oft-quoted paragraph (see, for example, Jornet Somoza, 2019; Llopis, 2013; Moyano Arellano, 2021, and even left-wing bookstores like Traficantes de sueños):

> I'm almost thirty and I feel like I've been robbed of my essence. It has to do with work. At some point, I internalized the idea that only he who works and can take care of himself is truly a man. I don't have a stable job and I haven't even learned how to take care of myself. My only asset is not possessing anything. I don't have a mortgage, I don't have dependents, I don't have a car, I don't have an apartment, I don't have a job. (López Menacho, 2022, p. 83)

At first glance, this is a clear expression of what Katja Jansson (2023, p. 113) calls "trabajismo": the ideology that places work at the center of society and frames it as the primary source of personal identity, social value, and the meaning of life. We also see how being is reduced to possessing, which naturalizes "the ideal of the autonomous, property-owning subject as the main goal in life" (Jornet Somoza, 2019, pp. 428–429). In this framework, dispossession leads to de-subjectification within systems of social validation – and even to a loss of personal identity. While workism is a transversal ideology, the notion of property as essence is more distinctly a hallmark of middleclassness, particularly in the broader context of *Yo, precario*.

Perhaps most striking, in relation to this, is that the narrator's claim that his "only asset is not possessing anything" is false: he holds the very valuable asset of a solid academic education, both at the postgraduate level and through several specialization courses. Hadas Weiss characterizes university education as a key middle-class investment (Weiss, 2019, p. 46), but it might also be added that failing to see education as an asset is equally characteristic of middle-class subjectivity in contemporary society (everyone has gone to university, right?). The precarity described in the book stems precisely from the protagonist's inability to find work that corresponds to his qualifications – Hartwig even defines the precarious worker as "the person who, despite having the proper professional training, is unable to achieve stability in life because the labor market prevents it" (Hartwig, 2017, p. 263). The jobs he takes are presented not as a long-term path, but simply as a means of getting by until something more stable and better aligned with his education appears. Indeed, as we will see by the end of this chapter, his education and access to the

written word are precisely the assets that will eventually allow him to escape precarity.

As we have already seen, precarisation also shapes the subjectivity of the precarious and prompts further reflection on the precarious *I* of the title. At several points, the narrator-protagonist considers the mismatch between the ideal self and the real self.

> I, who railed against this well-known mobile phone brand because I consider it a scam and said I would never contribute to feeding a nest of vipers; I, who swore I would never own a mobile phone because my independence was a supreme concept above all else; I, who said that those who carried out a redundancy plan like the one this very brand did months ago deserved to end up at the guillotine; I, who take to the streets to protest against the rich and demonstrate like a poor man; I, who pride myself on being upright and consistent; I, that very I, now betray myself at the slightest provocation and for the slightest gain. I am the traitor, turning my back on the establishment, but also on myself. (López Menacho, 2022, pp. 108–109)

Precarisation leads him to yet another loss of identity: betraying himself in order to navigate material scarcity, becoming, much to his regret, someone who sacrifices his principles in order to participate in the economic system. Jornet identifies a fragmented *I*, divided into multiple, often contradictory facets and aspirations, who must lie to itself in order to face the mirror: "Writing from the precarious condition thus becomes an inevitable exercise in indeterminacy that embraces contradiction, combining resignation with resignification, dignity with humiliation, and the vindication of precarious life with the aspiration to escape it" (Jornet Somoza, 2019, p. 431). This marks a recognition of defeat at the hands of precarity but also plants the seed of resistance. The act of writing about precarity is, paradoxically, also an act of self-production: by writing about my situation, I can at least identify as precarious; rather than being no one, I am someone. In the book's introduction, López Menacho describes the difficult economic situation that led him to apply for the mascot job, despite not wanting to do it. In the midst of this account of his entry into the world of precarity, there is a telling sentence: "At that time I was auditing a course in journalistic chronicle, where they told us what gonzo journalism was" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 17). Even as he accepts precarious work, the idea of writing about it begins to take shape; even as he accepts humiliation and compromise, the impulse to transform precarity into autobiographical material also arises.

In the epilogue to the 2022 edition, the author describes the success that followed the original publication: he went on an extensive tour of several cities, met many

booksellers and "a multitude of figures from the literary world," visited "hundreds of media outlets," and was interviewed by several national newspapers, putting himself "on the literary map." Over time, he has managed to escape precarity to work as a "digital strategist and content creator," teaches in universities and other organizations, and has continued "publishing books more regularly than I ever dreamed of" (López Menacho, 2022, p. 166). The economic capital gained from the book's publication may have been modest, but the cultural capital it generated was considerable, allowing him to enter the literary world, continue publishing, and eventually find work aligned with his education and trajectory. For the middle class, failure can sometimes be transformed into success.

Concluding remarks

Spanish postcrisis fiction has become a privileged space for narrating and negotiating the experience of precarisation, yet it remains overwhelmingly shaped by middleclassness. While novels like *Yo, precario* succeed in articulating the existential and material uncertainties of the crisis era, they also reveal the limitations of a literary field where middle-class subjectivity continues to dominate both representation and recognition. The result is a narrative landscape in which precarity is often framed not as structural exploitation, but as a disruption of previously held class expectations – a betrayal of meritocratic promises rather than a systemic injustice. This does not diminish the political or literary value of such texts, but it does call attention to the silences and exclusions they reproduce. To fully grasp the social dimensions of precarisation in contemporary Spain, we must therefore look beyond the stories of lost middle-class futures and seek out those voices and experiences – particularly from the working class – that remain marginal in both fiction and public discourse.

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Chapter 7.

Narrating Precarity:

Giorgio Falco's *Hypothesis of a Defeat*

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Since the mid-1990s, reflecting the impacts of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism on both labour and society, narratives of precarity have increasingly emerged in Italian literature as documented in literary scholarship (Dupré, 2016; Toracca, 2018; Bormida, 2020; Policastro, 2020; Toracca and Zinato, 2020; Baghetti, 2021). In this chapter I will analyze one of these recent representations of precarity in Italian literature, namely *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* [Hypothesis of a Defeat] (2017) by Giorgio Falco, which offers a profound exploration of how precarity shapes individual lives.

The autofictional Giorgio Falco is a representative of the post-Fordist Italian precariat, and his extensive experience with temporary and predominantly part-time employment profoundly impacts his life in various ways extending beyond the detrimental nature of his working conditions. He suffers from issues of depression and anxiety as a direct consequence of the absence of a meaningful and secure job, and in my close reading of the novel, I aim to focus on how the protagonist's precarious working life affects him both physically and mentally. What types of precarity are portrayed in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, and in what ways are they represented? How does the autofictional Falco describe the sensory and psychological experiences that lead to his precarious existence?

The novel employs a first-person narrator to tell the protagonist's various work experiences: from his first summer job in a pin factory to his success as an acclaimed author. Drawing so much upon his own life, Falco even asserts in an interview with Matilda Quarti (Quarti, 2017) that "I, Giorgio Falco, in the book, am not a

character: I am a document, starting from the image on the cover".[1] This raises the question: what kind of document does he consider himself to be? In this chapter I suggest that Falco, by depicting the ways in which his life is marked, both physically and mentally, by his many precarious work experiences, not only documents the transformations in Italian society but also reveals how the new modes of structuring work under the neoliberal regime of post-Fordism lead not only to precarity but to precarious existence.[2] Falco's novel offers a compelling lens for examining contemporary Italian labour literature because it foregrounds themes of precarity and identity within a neoliberal context, offering a critical portrayal of post-Fordist labour conditions. In addition, the novel's hybrid form, oscillating between autofiction and narrative documentary, makes it exemplary of recent trends in Italian contemporary literature. Even though the novel is autofictional, it functions as more than a personal memoir. The narrator oscillates between personal confession and impersonal observations of post-Fordist Italy, producing a tension between the protagonist's individual experience and structural forces in society. By using his own life as a form of tool for analysis, his body and life history become a site for systemic critique. The narrator never tries to present himself in a heroic way, but he remains faithful to his documentary and analytical style. To narrate his experiences, Falco uses precise, detailed, and anti-rhetorical language, as well as technical jargon (e.g. the language used by door-to-door salespersons, telecommunication language and more) which evokes the depersonalization and meaninglessness of contemporary labour in the sectors that the protagonist is familiar with. The novel is also characterized by an episodic and fragmented narrative style as it is structured as a series of episodic chapters centred around the protagonist's different working experiences and herein lies a double movement. Even though the events are told in chronological order, the reader soon becomes aware of the circular and repetitive nature of Falco's precarious work life. This condition, reflected in the novel's lack of linear progression, thus becomes a structural device within the novel: the episodic and fragmented structure mirrors the episodic, fragmented, and precarious nature of

[1] The book cover shows a cutting of an old photo of Falco taken by his partner Sabrina Ragucci. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are my own.

[2] Even though he defines himself as a document in the interview, we need to take into consideration the many omissions and the role memory plays in the retelling of his own life; because of this, I define the text as an autofictional novel.

Falco's life. *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* is therefore an important contribution to contemporary literature on precarity both due to the themes it foregrounds and its use of narrative strategies such as fragmentation, autofiction and documentary precision.

Falco, born in 1967, made his literary debut in 2004 with the short story collection *Pausa caffè* [Coffee Break] which literary critic Tiziano Toracca has defined as the first Italian literary text on the precariat (Toracca, 2022). The collection has also been described as an "epic poem in choral prose that depicts the social and existential disorder during the time of liberalization and market reforms" (Pegorari, 2017, p. 21). As the synopsis of *Pausa caffè* indicates, the stories, partially autobiographical, constitute "a sort of anatomical table on which the lives of precarious, temporary and fixed-term workers are laid bare", representing "voices rising from the hell of non-work, from work without meaning and hope, from labour that gently brutalizes, and from work reduced to mere force: work-power" (Falco, 2004). Thus, Falco's engagement with the casual and flexible workers' existence is evident from the outset of his literary career.

In 2009, following *Pausa caffè*, Falco published another collection of short stories, *L'ubicazione del bene* [The Location of Good] (2009), which is regarded by many as his most successful literary work (Toracca, 2022). In the years that followed, Falco frequently published both novels and short stories,[3] as well as trans-medial texts that intertwine photography and narrative.[4] He has been nominated to and received several literary rewards in Italy.[5] Notably, in 2018, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* was awarded the *Premio Pozzale Luigi Russo,* the *Premio Napoli*, and the *Premio Biella*

[3] *La compagnia del corpo* [The Body's Company] (2011), *La gemella H* [The Twin H] (2014), *Sottofondo italiano* [Italian Backdrop] (2015), *Il paradosso della sopravvivenza* [Survival's Paradox] (2023). In addition, he has published several short stories in different anthologies, such as *Sono come tu mi vuoi. Storie di lavori* [I Am as You Want Me To Be. Tales of Labour] (Susani, 2009), *Lavoro da morire. Racconti di un'Italia sfruttata* [Working to Death: Tales of an Exploited Italy] (Avoledo, 2009).

[4] Together with the visual artist and author Sabrina Ragucci, Falco has published trans-medial works such as *The Collared Dove Sound* (Ragucci and Falco, 2012) and *Flashover* (2020). Ragucci's artistic work has been exhibited many times both in Italy and abroad. In 2011 she was among the artists of the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and in 2014 she exhibited the photographs *from Condominio Oltremare* (Falco and Ragucci, 2014) at the Venice Biennale's International Architecture Exhibition.

[5] *Premio Pisa*, *Premio Mondello Opera Italiana*, *SuperMondello*, *Premio Volponi*, *Premio Lo Straniero*, Premio *Sila '49* to mention some of them.

letteratura e industria which is dedicated to novels and essays that "capture transformations from an economic and social perspective and investigate the relationships between the world of literature and the country's [Italy's] industrial development" (Premio Biella, n.d.).

Falco's autofictional novel, or *memoir* (Capello, 2021), narrates the story of Giorgio Falco who, from the age of 17, navigates a series of temporary jobs until, after many years, he finally secures a permanent position at a telecommunications company in Milan. Although the job provides greater security in terms of work stability, it simultaneously undermines his individuality and autonomy: he is reassigned to different departments without being consulted, and, at one point, his contract is even transferred to a foreign subsidiary. These factors contribute to a growing sense of alienation from both his workplace and colleagues, as well as from the tasks he is required to perform daily. The persistent struggle for low-wage employment, compounded by harsh working conditions and an escalating sense of alienation, leads the protagonist to grapple with anxiety and depression. He appears increasingly unable or unwilling to communicate with his colleagues at the telecommunications company, ultimately isolating himself in a minuscule office space of only 4 square meters. The isolation further exacerbates his feelings of disorientation, depression, and loneliness, and when he, after several months of working under these circumstances, is forbidden to use the cubicle, he suffers a breakdown and is granted sick leave. Instead of returning to the company, he resigns and finally dedicates all his time to writing.

Literary portrayals of the Italian precariat

As already mentioned, Italy has seen an increase in literary portrayals of precarity during the last decades, a trend that intensified following the approval of the *Biagi Act*, §30 in 2003 (Pegorari, 2018, p. 16). Representative examples include Andrea Bajani's *Cordiali saluti* [Kind Regards] (2005), Michela Murgia's *Il mondo deve sapere* [The World Needs to Know] (2006), and Vitalino Trevisan's *Works* (2016) all of which engage with the consequences of labour flexibilization and precarious employment.

The *Biagi Act* aimed to make the labour market more flexible through project-based contracts, apprenticeships, staff leasing, part-time work and more.[6] Together with industrial settings known from working-class literature of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, today we encounter protagonists employed in multinational companies, academia, the health sector as caregivers for both the elderly and children, restaurants, and food delivery services. Many of these protagonists of contemporary narratives of precarious labour represent in addition "the young person who, at the end of a usually long course of studies, encounters the destabilization of their own social identity, the periodic demolition not only of their professional position, but of their own affective prospects and moral" (Pegorari, 2017, p. 17), reflecting to a certain degree what Guy Standing (2011) describes as the "status discord" experienced by the youth precariat.

Narratives that explore flexibility, insecurity, exploitation, and emotional distress in the world of labour offer realistic insights into the contemporary Italian job market and the new social realities associated with so-called flexible jobs and employees. Italian literature has a long tradition of working-class literature, beginning with the period of the *verismo*, Verism, in the 1880s and 1890s, which focused on the lives of fishermen, miners, and farmers, continuing to *neorealismo*, Neorealism, in the 1940s to the mid-1950s which emphasized post-war social realities including novels and short stories with industrial settings. At the end of the 20th century, work and labour rights once again became highly predominant, and the profound transformation of Italian society becomes the subject of contemporary literary explorations. Despite the decline in Italian industry, industrial settings still appear in representations of labour.[7] However, some literary scholars have coined the term *letteratura aziendale* [business literature] (Contarini, 2010; Ceteroni, 2018) to better reflect and describe the expansion of both protagonists and settings within this literature.

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[6] The intention of introducing The Biagi Act, named after professor in Labour Law and Italian and Comparative Trade Union Law Marco Biagi, was not only to make the Italian labor market flexible, but also, among other motifs, to increase the participation in the labour market by young people and women and to control the informal labour market. Biagi was assassinated in 2002 by the new Red Brigades for his involvement in labour reforms.

[7] See for example *La dismissione* [The Abandonment] (2002) by Ermanno Rea and Silvia Avallone's *Swimming to Elba* (2012).

Reports show that youth employment in Italy is unstable and discontinuous. In the private sector, 40.9% of those under 35 have a precarious contract (fixed-term or seasonal),[8] and in the public sector 48.6% of all young employees are so-called flexible or atypical workers (Agenzia Italiana per la Gioventù, 2024, p. 70).[9] The percentage is worse in the public sector, but it hires significantly less young people (13.8% versus 34% of all employees). Other studies (ISTAT, 2024) show a significant disparity between female and male employment rates,[10] and in the proportion of involuntary part-time work (15.6% for women compared to 5.1% for men) in Italy.[11] These data regarding work life and precarity resonate in contemporary literature, where recurrent themes include atypical work, job insecurity, unemployment, the decline and outsourcing of Italian industry, women's work, work accidents, exploitation of migrant workers, and the economic crisis among others. These themes are explored through various genres such as drama, poetry and narrative, and not only do the authors depict the Italian precariat through fictional forms,[12] but in many cases, they use their own working experiences from

[8] For the age group 15–24, the number is 57.7% (p. 73).

[9] In the 15–24 age group in the public sector, flexible workers represent 74.4% (p. 73).

[10] 56.5% versus 76%. The rate of non-participation in the labour market is 18% female and 12.3% male according to ISTAT data from 2024.

[11] The same data show that in terms of job quality, more women than men report job insecurity (4.7% versus 3.7%), and a greater percentage of women than men are overqualified for their current positions (29.4% versus 25.4%). However, men face a higher risk of fatal accidents and permanent disabilities in the workplace (13.6% versus 5.3%) (ISTAT, 2024, p. 7).

[12] Some examples noteworthy of mentioning in this context are *Vita precaria e amore eterno* [Precarious Life and Eternal Love] (2023) by Mario Desiati, *Sono fame* [I am Hunger] (2022) by Natalia Guerrieri, and *Generazione mille euro* [Generation Thousand Euros] (2006) by Antonio Incorvaia and Alessandro Rimassa. Desiati's novel tells the story of Martin Bux who leaves university and finds temporary work in a poorly paid call center based in a basement in Rome. S*ono fame* narrates on the other hand about the food delivery business. Chiara, an aspiring philosophy student, works as a food delivery driver. The job pretends to offer great personal freedom, but Chiara's days are defined by an anonymous app telling her when and where to deliver to the point that she starts to ignore her own health and begins to suffer from severe hunger and fatigue. In 2006, inspired by a news article in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, Antonio Incorvaia and Alessandro Rimassa, publish online and for free, the novel *Generazione mille euro*. The novel narrates the story of four young Italians sharing an apartment in Milan, all living in precarious conditions. Strikingly, the novel's title is now introduced into the Italian language indicating young people who earn only thousand euros per month (*Treccani*, n.d.). Another text to mention in this context, is the ironic guide to the flexible worker, *Mi spezzo, ma non m'impiego* (2010) by Andrea Bajani. The title, which can be translated into English as "I break, but I will not be hired" refers

call centres, food delivery and restaurants when representing contemporary precarity,[13] while others choose to narrate their parents' job experiences, often from industrial contexts.[14] Interestingly, there has been an increase in the use of hybrid genres which blend the fictional with the documentary. By combining journalism, photography, newspaper articles, interviews and other material with the fictional, many authors explore new hybrid genres. Most famous outside of Italy for his exploring of such genre hybridity, is the author and journalist Roberto Saviano and his *Gomorra* (2006) about the Neapolitan mafia, the Camorra. The many depictions of precarity and labour-related settings show how contemporary literature engages once again with social and political issues (Donnarumma, 2010), leading scholars to use terms such as "authors of reality" (Palumbo, 2011, p. 219) and "ethical literature" (Palumbo, 2017) when describing Italian literature from the latest decades.

From Fordism to post-Fordism

As previously noted, *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* is a depiction of how contemporary labour-market precarity can impact our lives. However, it begins its exploration of precarity by narrating the story of Falco's father, a representative of the working class during the Fordist era. Falco's father moved from Sicily to Milan after World War II, leaving behind his agricultural background. In Milan, he finds a job as a bus driver at the ATM, Milan's municipal public transport company. Each day, he puts on the uniform that his son Giorgio admires so much that he wishes to wear one during the

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ironically and painfully to the Italian expression "mi piego ma non mi spezzo" ("I bend, but I do not break").

[13] Two central contributions in this context are the autofictional *Il mondo deve sapere. Romanzo tragicomico di una telefonista precaria* [The World Needs to Know. A Tragicomic Novel by a Precarious Telephone Operator] (2006) by Michela Murgia and *Works* (2016) by Vitaliano Trevisan. Murgia's novel, based on blog posts (no longer available) from the time she used to work in telephone marketing at the American company Kirby, analyzes the relationships between employers, employees and customers as well as describes the exploitation and psychologically unhealthy working conditions at Kirby, making of it "a protest against precarious employment, an evil of our society that we must fight against for the good of young people and the country" (Floris, 2013). Central to Trevisan's book, as in Falco's *Ipotesi*, is the depiction of his many working experiences: from sailboat manufacturer, ice-cream seller, waiter and watchman to author.

[14] Such as the novels *Figlia di una vestaglia blu* [Daughter of a Blue Gown] (2006) by Simona Baldanzi and *La fabbrica del panico* [The Factory of Panic] (2013) by Stefano Valenti.

carnival. Falco's father embodies professional pride through his uniform, which he continues to wear his entire professional life, even when he advances to an administrative position. He works diligently, believing he is improving his child's future, and his greatest wish for Giorgio is that he will secure a proper, stable job.

Falco's father represents an era and a class in which workers identify closely with their professions whereas Falco himself needs to take on the jobs that are offered to him adapting to the demand for flexible work arrangements. Every new job that Falco undertakes is characterized by a similar structure: rigid hierarchies composed of distant bosses, officious middle-managers, and employees on temporary contracts or engaged in undeclared work. There is little to no autonomy in task execution, and minimal opportunities for professional development, except for occasional and limited pathways into middle-management. In these conditions, Giorgio Falco and those he represents struggle to realize themselves or to develop through work, facing challenges such as part-time and/or temporary contracts, hollow promotions that fail to provide meaningful opportunities, and insecurity in the workplace.

Even though his regular route has been discontinued, and the ATM is put out to tender, tangible remnants of Falco's father's job remain: there are still bus and tram drivers, tram tracks to follow, schedules to adhere to, and passengers to transport from one destination to another.[15] In contrast, very little endures from Falco's work experiences other than consumer goods and ephemeral results, and the job at the telecommunications company, becomes a further step into alienation as he is reduced to an anonymous code within the system, i.e. ZZGFAI.

As previously stated, the autofictional novel portrays the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist approach to organising the work sphere through the juxtaposition of Falco and his father. The protagonist is aware of these changes, as demonstrated in the following passage where he reflects on the differences between the two eras to which he belongs: the one before and after the onset of post-Fordist precarity. The trade union has become an instrument of transition between the two eras, and Falco affirms:

[15] Even when the bus company disappears, Falco still finds images of ATM buses and company offices on Google Street View long after the death of his father.

> I did not want to resign myself and remain trapped between the two eras in which I had grown up; I didn't want to succumb to the second, it was better to disappear with the first when everything seemed like it could last forever: the era that had cradled me as a child, ensured accommodation, a bottle, a leash, hot meals, ice-cold sparkling wine, fake snow on the synthetic fir, the warmth of central heating in winter, long summer holidays, pencils to underline books. I attended union meetings. […] The discussion began, the company managers interchanged with the union leaders, we workers' representatives were a sort of audience, but some intervened; I took notes for books I would never write. (Falco, 2017, pp. 280–281)

At a certain point, Falco is transferred from his permanent position in the telecommunications company to a Romanian subcontractor: "Deposited pending dismissal. According to the multinational company […] I and the other unfortunates would have kept the same job, worked without being directly employed by the multinational" (Falco, 2017, p. 283). The indoor conditions in the new office are poor, but when Falco attempts to address the problem, he is met only with silence and hostility from his colleagues. When a female colleague collapses, they seemingly ignore the incident: "The litter workers had laid the woman on the stretcher and carried her away, amid the indifference of their colleagues, who could not – and did not want to – interrupt their work even with a half-corpse at their side" (Falco, 2017, p. 285). They are likely afraid of losing their jobs if the workflow is interrupted or if they voice complaints about their working conditions.

Falco's position as an outsider or troublemaker becomes more pronounced when his colleagues become aware of his literary pursuits. He finds himself distanced and seen as an anomaly upon being identified as a published author: "The writer is expelled from the workplace by his own colleagues, even before the managers. He is considered a foreign body, one that is not like us. One that shouldn't be there. If you are there, something is wrong. You are a charlatan, a swindler, a traitor" (Falco, 2017, p. 291). Falco becomes "an enemy to be destroyed" (Falco, 2017, p. 279), and this is done by excluding him from the community of colleagues and by giving him more senseless tasks like being demoted to *collector*, those who answer inquiries from people unable to pay their phone bills. However, Falco becomes a collector in a double sense: "I collected the anger, the misery of the Italians impoverished by me, I listened to all those voices, names and surnames and they asked for extensions, *repayment plans*, bills to pay the utilities; they were the voices of small entrepreneurs, workers, pensioners, the unemployed, all defeated by resignation and humiliation

transformed into sudden bursts of anger" (Falco, 2017, p. 280, italics in the original.).

As previously noted, Falco's father hopes that his son will secure a stable job; however, the fixed position ultimately fails to provide the protagonist with the stability his father desired for him:

> I was living the life he had hoped so much for me. Employed in a large company, occupying a modest role, but in theory, with a bit of power. I held the position of a contemporary bureaucrat, just when almost everyone considered bureaucracy the worst of evils, the cause of the Italian decline. I conserved something of the twentieth century, I was an executor of rules which were then denied by the flexibility required by those who did not want to follow the rules […]. (Falco, 2017, p. 266)

In the article "In the Name of a Loss: Work and the Contradictions of Contemporary Literary Imaginary," Toracca (2019) suggests that even though "the work of the past" seems to be lost in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*, something else seems to be gained, namely a sort of emancipation from the social identity and the limits and bonds that work entails, claiming that Falco "*can no longer* work as his father but at the same time *does not want to*" (Toracca, 2019, pp. 282, 287–288, italics in original.). There is some truth to Toracca's hypothesis: Falco's literary ambitions might not be in accordance with a permanent contract with long hours at the telecommunications company, but I am not convinced that he prefers the precarious working conditions he experiences either. However, by exemplifying the divergent work trajectories of Falco and his father, the novel provides insight into the many changes in the structuring and regulation of work life and the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and its societal implications in Italy.

Precarity's impact on the body

Many of the jobs that Falco undertakes are physically demanding; he loads merchandise onto trucks and in warehouses, drives for hours as a private chauffeur for the textile export industry, and works as a door-to-door salesman selling newspaper subscriptions in all kinds of weather. On one occasion, he even finds himself in a threatening situation in the apartment of an older, drunk man who makes advances towards him. Falco's first job, as previously mentioned, is at a factory that produces, amongst other items, pins and badges. He takes on the summer job at the age of 17 with the intention of using the earnings to travel through Europe,

however, when summer arrives, he ends up alone in his parents' apartment instead of travelling with his friends. The change of plans may be attributed to the hard work in the factory.

The job at the pin factory is described in detail regarding its physical facets. Along with two other young men, Falco operates a machine that produces pins of Pope John Paul II, Bruce Springsteen and others, and they are compensated on a piecework basis. Since it requires three people to operate the machine, they must synchronize all breaks and toilet visits. The pin machine is situated separately from the "real" factory workers, *operai veri*, as Falco (2017, pp. 64, 76), notes several times. He refers to himself as a "labourer for fun" (Falco, 2017, p. 65). The relatively small room they work in becomes uncomfortably hot during the summer months; but, drinking enough water during the shift to satisfy their needs requires more breaks, resulting in less payment. The factory's demands override basic bodily needs, a theme that is metaphorically illustrated in the novel's depiction of how the sounds of the machinery drown out the sounds of the human body, particularly when Falco goes to the toilet. The factory noises are imprinted on the body and resonate persistently within the three young men. Over time, the noise generated by the machinery they operate takes on a parodic rhythm:

> We transformed the now familiar noise *tum-um-clac*, *tum-um-clac*, *tum-um-clac* into a distorted sound of meaning, something that reminded us of our school days, and so we repeated *hic-et-nunc*, *hic-et-nunc*, *hic-et-nunc* [here and now], as if we were the drunk pin machine, we mocked the Latin phrase using our modest high school education, but there was little to mock, the here and now, the imperative injunction was linked to the pins, to nothing else. (Falco, 2017, p. 79)

There are other significant sounds that characterize Falco's working days in the factory, which he directly associates with bodily sensations, such as the bell that signals the lunch break and the end of the shift:

> The bell at noon found me more energetic, but the one at five in the afternoon gave me more happiness; the stressed muscles now dissolved; the numb nerves of the neck became young again; the eyes had a depository of tiredness, the gunk gathered in the tear ducts, it was enough to use the knuckles of the fingers, a corner of the t-shirt, to clear the hazing eyes and recover a little of oneself. (Falco, 2017, p. 74)

By Saturday, young Falco is exhausted: "In the evening I very often stayed at home [...]. I wasn't just tired of an exhaustion to overcome with a long sleep; it was a

harmful tiredness, which made me turn on the small, old television; I watched the same programs as my parents, nibbling the dead skin on my work-scratched fingers" (Falco, 2017, p. 78). Too fatigued to go out with his friends, he remains alone in his bedroom experiencing what is described as harmful exhaustion accompanied by the sounds of his family on the other side of the closed door. It is this mental exhaustion, in addition to the physical fatigue, that drives Falco to seek isolation from the company of others, and this need for isolation will, as previously mentioned, also recur later in his precarious working life.

Deterioration

As we have seen, the protagonist's life is significantly shaped by his precarious work situation. Although some of the jobs he undertakes last for longer periods of time, he must continuously seek new employment, often enduring absurd job interviews and adapting to new working conditions. When discussing the summer job in the pin factory, we saw how the job affects and, to a certain extent, restrains and represses the protagonist's body. Later in life, he also experiences how work itself contributes to existential precarity as the transfer to the Romanian subcontractor marks a decline in Falco's well-being. The change is perceived immediately: "From the first day of work they had changed my username with which I had lived the previous decade. I was no longer GFALCO but ZZGFAI. For years I had seen the ZZ codes indicate minor activities, non-value-added activities, as they were defined, or tasks destined first for marginalization, then for robotization" (Falco, 2017, p. 284). The last remains of (a personal) identity in the workplace are entirely erased as Falco becomes part of the division responsible for activities soon to be automated. He is now considered interchangeable and expendable (Tramontina-Salar, 2021, p. 374). Falco himself articulates the changes in his login information in the following manner: "I had become a z, the last letter of the Italian alphabet […] zz, followed by the initials of the name, surname and a number, testifying to the deterioration of the human being. We were the secret of a technical age, our presence was determined by obscure impersonal processes, devoid of responsibility" (Falco, 2017, p. 258). The company for which Falco works has initiated a gradual destruction or obliteration of both his identity and status as a thinking human being.

After being caught and denied the use of the little office in which he has been hiding for months, Falco seeks medical aid.[16] He undergoes a series of tests to establish his mental health: "I reread the test. Depressed means nothing. Feeling alone means nothing. Having ideas of death means nothing. Tingling is a beautiful word. Then I answered the tests with pentagonal figures, grids and dots, bars and crosses, associations between images and words. I had undergone the test to measure non-verbal intelligence and the test to control anger" (Falco, 2017, p. 310). After the test he must see a psychologist, and he tells her about his recurrent sleeping problems: "Sudden nocturnal awakenings, in the period between twenty past three and four in the morning, sometimes right at three thirty, without the need for an alarm clock. Three thirty, my father's time. Very often I couldn't go back to sleep, I remained wide-eyed in bed, I didn't read or write, I waited; then I got up and went to work, or rather, to lock myself in Sgabuzzis" (Falco, 2017, p. 310).[17] While working for the ATM, Falco's father used to wake up at half past three in the morning and have an espresso before leaving for his shift. As a child, Falco would wake up to his father's alarm clock, listen to his morning ritual before falling asleep again. The sounds and the dim light from the family kitchen made him feel safe. However, as an adult working for the telecommunications company, this habit is reawakened due to his deteriorating mental health. Instead of the childhood sensation of the safety of everyday life, Falco now remains awake, waiting for the day to start, or maybe for the (senseless) precarious ritual to start all over again.

Concluding remarks

Giorgio Falco's *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* offers a poignant portrayal of precarity in contemporary Italy. Through the lens of autofiction, Falco documents his trajectory through a series of unstable jobs, but it is the permanent position at the telecommunications company that deepens his sense of alienation. Thus, the novel illustrates how post-Fordist labour conditions not only reshape professional

[16] He clocks in early to work to avoid talking to his colleagues, eats lunch alone in a room distant from where the others eat, brings a large bottle to the office in which he urinates. He avoids the new tasks that management has given him while asking to continue with the ones he had to leave. At the same time, he continues to write on one his books.

[17] The name *Sgabuzzis* that the author gives his cubicle is a dialectal variant of *sgabuzzino*, storage closet.

identities but how they also can erode mental well-being, leading to a form of existential precarity and a deeper loss of autonomy, community, and meaning.

"I have used labour in order to write about Italy," Falco states in the aforementioned interview with Quarti (2017). By juxtaposing his own working experiences with those of his father, a representative of the Fordist era, the novel underscores the profound societal shift from stable employment to flexible, fragmented labour. This transition is not merely economic but deeply personal, affecting relationships, self-perception, and bodily integrity as observed in *Ipotesi di una sconfitta*. However, as pointed out by Toracca (2019), it is not clear if *Hypothesis of a Defeat*'s protagonist is really searching for a work life similar to that of his father, stating that even though the protagonist narrates his many professional experiences, he depicts in particular his "exit from the world of work," an exit seen as a kind of liberation (Toracca, 2019, p. 287). In my opinion, it is not so much an exit from the world of work (Falco continues to work as an author), as much as the exit from working conditions marked by unhealthy competitiveness, unpredictability, professional dead ends, and a strong sense of alienation. Even though the novel is based on the author's own life, the author-protagonist combines detailed personal confessions and accounts with impersonal observations of precarious labour conditions to such a degree that he transforms autobiography into systemic critique and himself into proof, or a document, of what might happen under the rule of post-Fordist labour. With a documentary and anti-heroic way of narrating, Falco strips away any optimism about labour as a site of emancipation or meaningful fulfilment. Instead, he exposes the many banalities of precarious jobs and exposes the absurdity of contemporary labour culture. Therefore, I read the novel as both a documentation of precarity and a critical examination of precarity.

I claim that the title *Ipotesi di una sconfitta* encapsulates a dual loss; it suggests not only a personal defeat, i.e. Falco's inability to thrive within the structures of contemporary forms of employment, but also a collective one, marking the erosion of labour rights, solidarity, and the dignity once associated with work. Yet, the novel also gestures toward a form of resistance: through writing, Falco reclaims agency, transforming his precarious experiences into testimony. The novel's fragmented and episodic style reflects the protagonist's decades as a precarious worker, and Falco documents his repetitive labour trajectory from the first experience in the pin factory to the anonymous code ZZGFAI in the telecommunications company. At this stage

Falco becomes both interchangeable and obliterated, but not silenced: "Here I was, free, empty, and terrified. The end of Work didn't mean being healthy, however. After a few short decades, my adventure as a worker ended. I knew I wouldn't find any work. All that remained was literature" (Falco, 2017, p. 327). Thus, the novel's and the protagonist's "defeat" evoked in the title remains hypothetical and an open question that invites reflection on what it means to live and work under conditions of precarity.

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Chapter 8.

The Call for a Community:

Summoning the Precariat in Contemporary Greek Literature

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The ideas of precarity and precarisation, although present at least since the 1970s, and more prominently since the 1990s (Bourdieu, 1998), became mainstream in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, particularly through the work of Guy Standing (2011), as the crisis accentuated and accelerated the existing politico-economic tendencies of neoliberalism. The crisis condensed in time and made readily visible and widely felt the socio-economic repercussions that had already been sensed in the lower social strata before the crisis. This was acutely felt in Greece, where the crisis was particularly harsh, causing a radical degradation of people's lives, as well as an erosion of the social bond. As the crisis intensified, the number of literary works that discussed and depicted its origins, as well as its individual and collective implications, grew. In this paper I examine works that seem to call for the creation of a community of precarious subjects that may resist the assault on their lives. They were published at the onset and in the aftermath of the Greek crisis, so I will briefly sketch it out as a necessary context.

The 2008 crisis started to unfold in Greece in 2009, when the country's deficit was revealed to be four times higher than previously reported (12.7% of GDP, later revised to 15.4%). This ushered the country into a period of prolonged instability and loss of independence. The austerity measures imposed by the troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF) through three consecutive bailout programmes aggravated an already difficult socio-economic condition. Amongst the most visible outcomes were increased inequalities and poverty. Unemployment rose

from 9% in 2006 to 27% in 2013, reaching 58% among those aged 15–24 and 43% for those between 25 and 29 (Livanos and Tzika, 2022b, p. 7). In addition, rising homelessness and the severe impact of crisis on healthcare contributed to increased rates of depression and suicide, with the latter rising by 55.8% between 2007 and 2011 (Madianos et. al., 2014, p. 44). A decrease in birthrates and a rise in brain-drain (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2017, pp. 56–58) intensified the feeling that the country's future was as much undermined as its present. Last but not least, the crisis ended up swelling the ranks of the far right (culminating in the murder of the antifascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas in 2013 by members of the Golden Dawn, a parliamentary party at the time, and now a recognised criminal organisation). Counter to those developments there arose the Greek version of *indignados* (*αγανακτισμένοι*) with its peak at the demonstrations of 2011, along with a surge of solidarity expressed mainly through soup kitchens and some community-based healthcare.

However, the years of the Greek government-debt crisis (officially 2009–2018) were neither the beginning nor exactly the end of precarity as a condition affecting – mostly but not solely – the working class and the most socially vulnerable. Gialis et. al. (2017) point out that the regulatory reforms of the crisis years worsened conditions in a labour market already characterised by high flexibility and poor job security and social benefits, further devaluing atypical employment. Livanos and Tzika (2022a, p. 40) describe the forms and parameters of involuntary non-standard employment (INE) in Greece as the crisis led to a shrinkage of the public sector and the expansion of sectors which are more reliant on such employment forms, resulting in "higher job insecurity, poorer career prospects, lack of social security and poorer working conditions." Examining the span 2000–2018, Livanos and Tzika (2022b) show that some aspects of precarious work conditions, such as unpaid overtime, started increasing as early as 2006, although it is clear that 2008 marks a steep increase in all the major parameters indicating the precarisation of labour, which affected most severely low-educated and female workers.

There is wider consensus as to the emergence of a "literature of crisis" post-2010, which signalled a return to the collective after a long dwelling on the individual (Hatzivasiliou, 2018, pp. 807–853; Hatzivasiliou, Sainis, and Papargyriou, 2020) – although there are also dissenting voices (such as Kourtovik, 2021, p. 326) that consider this category more of a journalistic construct, particularly of the foreign

press. The cultural production of the Greek crisis has drawn international academic interest (e.g. Tziovas, 2017; Boletsi et. al., 2020; Corrado et. al., 2022) and there is even some criticism that it was "occasionally treated as a kind of colonial spectacle by foreign commentators and artists" (Tziovas, 2017, p. 9). There is also some discussion as to the definition of the 'literature of crisis': Does it include solely works that *focus* on the crisis, or also others, written *under its influence* and therefore echoing it in one way or another, or maybe even earlier ones, that somehow predict the crisis by pointing out the failings of capitalism as well as those of the Greek state and society – could it even overlap with the older genre of "economic novel" (Marazopoulos, 2025)? Whatever the definition, this is an extensive body of works and Lygouris (2022, p. 15) argues that, even with a conservative estimate, over a hundred works of fiction have been discussed by different critics under this loose grouping. These works, including some anthologies of short stories written "to order" (e.g. Poulakos and Koumasidis, 2012) approach the subject of the economic crisis from various, often overlapping, angles: ethical-political (e.g. Mantis, 2014), historical/generational (e.g. Panayotopoulos, 2011), focusing on the relation of Greece to the West (e.g. Akrivos, 2013), using a dystopian setting (e.g. Modinos, 2014), focusing on migrants and homeless (e.g. Galanaki, 2015), racism and the rise of the far-right (e.g. Tsirbas, 2013), or even as part of detective plots focusing on political and economic corruption (e.g. Markaris, 2010; 2011; 2012: 'The crisis trilogy').

In his early overview of these works, Hatzivasiliou (2018, p. 811–829) discerns among them 25 texts that put crisis at the core of their plot, portraying characters that live in a crisis-ridden world. However, even though the direness of the condition creates a gamut of negative feelings in the reader, thus making felt a need for change, the precariat as a potentially revolutionary class or even group of people is far from being the core concern of these works. Indeed, the loss of agency is concomitant with the lack of alternative (the well-known TINA: there is no alternative) claimed by the neoliberal policies which led to the crisis and were further implemented as its remedy. Writing *à propos* of graffiti, Boletsi (2016) argues that during the crisis years, the subject was presented in Greek public discourse as either guilty and responsible for the crisis or as a powerless victim of domestic corruption and/or global powers. In both cases s/he/they would be incapacitated as an agent of change. Indeed, the narratives of crisis often portray fragmented, defeated subjects, permeated by the condition of precarity. In this chapter, I examine works that, even if they do not

make a straightforward case for the reclaiming of agency, employ strategies to call for a community of precarious subjects, both within and beyond their fictional worlds.

The question of whether the precariat can be seen – or, rather, understand itself – as a new class, as Standing argues, or not (Seymour, 2012; Breman, 2013) is in itself a debated subject, and contemporary Greek literature does not seem to dwell on this question. Despite the crisis, in contemporary Greece as much as in most of the post-1989 world, class is not a prominent analytic category in public discourse, and even the earlier tradition of working-class literature in Greece is rather limited (Petsa et. al., 2021), and class itself is downplayed in these works during their canonisation processes (Petsa and Natsina, 2025). Community, on the other hand, is a polyvalent idea of the social imaginary, often-recurring in the Greek context, unrestrained by economic determinism, and claimed by the Left (e.g. Castoriadis, 1987), the anarchists, and the Christian Orthodox tradition (e.g. Giannnaras, 2021), as well as by their nationalist overlaps – paradoxical as they may seem. From an anthropological viewpoint, the continued importance of family and local communities in a society with no strong tradition of welfare state or class consciousness is not hard to understand. The crisis saw a surge of solidarity (Kourachanis-Lalioti, 2019; Teloni-Adam, 2016) and the formation of some *ad hoc* communities, not least among them the movement of *αγανακτισμένοι* [*indignados*] – politically divided though they were between the left and the nationalist right (occupying respectively the lower and the upper sides of Syntagma Square in Athens during the 2011 demonstrations). The idea of a community of precarious subjects affected by the common onslaught of the crisis and the continued neoliberal policies, over and above ideological differences, is one that was felt necessary on many fronts, not least *vis-à-vis* the rise of the far right.[1]

The works I discuss highlight the condition of precarity in all its key aspects – poverty, insecurity, fear, violence, and loneliness – but they also call, as I argue, for the formation of a community that might support people through hardship and resist the degradation and dehumanisation of their lives. It might also fend off the

[1] If mainstream politics is any indication, it is worth mentioning that the left party Syriza (ΣΥ.ΡΙΖ.Α.-Προοδευτική συμμαχία/Coalition of the Radical Left - Progressive Alliance) twice formed a coalition government with the right-wing nationalist party AnEl (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες/Independent Greeks) during 2015–2019.

infamous dangerousness of precarious subjects themselves (Standing, 2011) lest they find recourse from their woes to violence and the far right. To this end, the works employ strategies to engage and motivate the reader to imagine and even be part of such a community. For this chapter I focus on the widely acclaimed short story collection *Κάτι θα γίνει, θα δεις* by Christos Ikonomou (2010, published in English as *Something Will Happen, You'll See* in 2016) and the short-story cycle by Stratoula Theodoratou, *Ο ουρανός της παλάμης* [The Sky of the Palm] (2021). Both concentrate mostly on poor areas of Athens, such as the zone of shipbuilding and repair industry, where unemployment reached 80% at the height of the crisis. Additionally, I discuss briefly a more recent composite novella by Christos Ikonomou, *Πες της* [Tell Her] (2024), in which a female courier visits areas both rich and poor in the post-pandemic era, casting light on the condition of precarity and its repercussions across the sociopolitical spectrum from a slant angle.

Something will happen, you'll see: Struggling optimism

To discuss Ikonomou's *Κάτι θα γίνει* …, I find particularly apposite the broad definition of precarious work by Kalleberg (2009, p. 2) as employment that is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker." The lack of certainty, the fear and anxiety surrounding all aspects of work that are key to this definition are indeed prominent in this collection. The sixteen stories feature people who have been laid off work when factories closed down, seeking a place from corrupt politicians as a favour ("And a Kinder Egg for the Kid") deemed redundant after years of service ("Mao", "For Poor People"), or laid off just two years before retirement, trying their hand at any job, ending up drunkards ("Foreign. Exotic"). They spend time looking for jobs to no avail, working for a low pay in whatever they can find, working two temporary part-time jobs ("Charcoal Moustache"), tolerating abusive behaviours and work overtime to keep their job – even at the cost of their lives ("Placard and Broomstick"). There are people who have lost loved ones to work accidents because of unsafe conditions ("The Tin Soldier") and elderly who queue in the cold street in the dead of night to receive healthcare ("The Things They Carried"), and yet others who demonstrate in the streets for safety at work and get beaten up by the police ("The Tin Soldier"). Insecurity, health- or life-risk and the fear of becoming destitute is everywhere. Poverty is like a "pet rat" (p. 18), gnawing at their lives. These people struggle to make ends meet as bills pile up or can't even

feed their kids. The bank threatens to take their house ("Something Will Happen, You'll See"), the luckiest among them work extra shifts to save a few euros for their piggy bank at the end of the week ("Come on Ellie, Feed the Pig"). Others are faced with despair as they lose their job in their early fifties, with full family responsibilities and zero prospects of re-employment, and one even contemplates suicide ("For the Poor People"). Fear, a word found in almost every story, is the prevailing feeling into which work- and, concomitantly, economic insecurity is translated. One of the heroes sums it up very accurately: "I see people crushed by their jobs. People who are tired and scared. It's as if you cannot work without being afraid. [As if they pay you to fear, not to live]" (p. 163). The last phrase (omitted for some reason from the English translation) makes abundantly clear the complete reversal of the work's objective in conditions of precarity: from securing the necessities of life to subjecting the individual to perpetual fear.

Under such conditions, people are clearly no longer the members of a proud and strong working class, as Standing (2011, pp. 21–24) aptly points out in his description of the precariat. Indeed, in these stories, solidarity can feel like a betrayed promise, as the unions protect from unemployment only those with a clear political affiliation – to any of the parties ("And a Kinder Egg…"). Indeed, parties are a little like mafia clans, protecting their members to a degree, but not caring for those who don't belong to them ("The Tin Soldier"). Strikes fail, a man protests the deadly accident of his friend all by himself by holding a blank placard on a broomstick as all existing systems of representation fail him ("Placard…").[2] The care from a colleague comes back as a useless memory when unemployment strikes and makes ironic the kind gift of a pair of safety welding glasses ("For Poor People"). And when love fails in these neighbourhoods, one cannot expect even a little compassion: the man leaves with the little money collected by the woman and lets her wonder 'if poor people do things like that to other poor people what on earth are rich people supposed to do to us' ("Come on, Ellie…", p. 19).

Furthermore, the characters' narrated monologues – an apposite narrative technique for people whose self-description would be possibly traumatic to themselves – reveal people steeped in shame: They are ashamed of their nondescript jobs, carrying

[2] For an interpretation of the story as presenting a modality of *stasis* against alienation and dispossession, and as staging the desire for alternative languages by registering a crisis of representation, see Boletsi (2020).

"crooks" (ice cubes that have less ice than they seem, "The Blood of the Onion") – "an easy job, ludicrous, a job to be ashamed of" (p. 103), mopping the hospital floors ("Something Will Happen…"), selling Tupperware door to door ("Mao"), or putting newspapers and leaflets in plastic bags ("The Union of Bodies"), for which they invent the fancy work title "bagmaker" – only, "he doesn't make bags. He puts things in bags…. So, he is something else. He just doesn't know what" (p. 206). They are sorely ashamed that they need to beg for a few euros to feed their children ("And a Kinder egg…") or feel a lasting self-disgust for imploring a useless MP for a post, still smelling the smell of his cologne on their hands for years ("Mao"). Some carry "a deep hatred of themselves for being so small and insignificant" ("The Things They Carried", p. 138). One is scathingly dismissed by his spouse for being unable to receive the payment due to him: "Did you try giving him [your boss] a blowjob? … You should be ashamed. You call yourself a man? If you were a whore he'd give you more" ("The Union of Bodies", p. 201). This particular instance reveals the added challenge posed by precarisation on individuals living with traditional ideas and expectations of masculinity (Standing 2011, pp. 60–65), as is often the case for people with low education, who are the most vulnerable to precarity. Shame strikes the identity of precarious subjects at its core: they are no longer identified by a set of skills that they would sell in exchange for a livelihood, a worker's identity, a social place, and the feeling of self-worth and belonging that accompanies them. In a neoliberal system that promotes relentlessly the risk-taking "enterprising self", modelled on middle-class processes – "these days they want a resume for a job moving furniture" (p. 191) – they are clearly failing to produce themselves as "subjects of value" (Skeggs, 2004, p. 76–78).

Poverty, insecurity, anxiety, fear, shame, self-loathing and the feeling of uselessness go hand in hand with violence. The structural (and often physical) violence suffered by precarious subjects is linked in multiple ways to the violence they inflict on their immediate environment. Bourdieu (1998, p. 82) speaks of a "destructuring of existence" effectuated by insecurity and the "ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space." It is also clear that the overwhelming stress, the feeling of injustice as well as the lack of self-respect, trust and prospect shake to the core the respect and self-restraint exercised in a society where one expects to be treated justly and equally in return. Indeed, unemployed and casual workers are altogether stripped of their ability to project themselves into the future (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 83). "Mao" makes the shredding of the social web through a

loss of prospect abundantly clear, as it tells a story of rapes, threats of violence, the knifing of a pregnant woman, and shootings.

However, in this neighbourhood that has forsaken all hope of justice, Mao himself keeps vigil at night, carrying a gun and petting a stray cat. This young communist, son of a communist killed in a work accident, insists on protecting his family as well as retain some meaning for their lives. Indeed, people who show some (symbolical) resistance have sometimes connections to the left, as is the case of another son of a worker killed in a work accident ("Tin Soldier") who participates in demonstrations, and Mike, in the "Blood of the Onion", who likes to recite the poetry of the leftist poets Miguel Hernández and Michalis Ganas. Their personal history and (political) education seem to help them in this, but there are multiple other characters who are guided by their sheer humanity, warmth, and the understanding of the need for solidarity. Living in conditions that question their place in the world, their social role, their right to a home, even their survival, they insist on forming close bonds that resist their utter scattering. A woman glues her hands to her partner's to prevent his deportation, and the cleaner offers to give them her food while they are in custody; she later recounts this story of resistance to encourage her husband who despairs over the imminent loss of their house ("Something Will Happen…"). The elderly queuing for healthcare in the cold night light a fire and share stories to keep themselves warm ("The Things They Carried"). Brothers support each other ("The Tin Soldier"), kids care for their parents ("Penguins Outside the Accounting Office"), couples stick together through thin and thinner ("Foreign. Exotic", "People are Streinz", "Piece by Piece They're Taking my World Away"). There is a systemic assault and there is betrayal among their ranks, but there is also resistance and hope. Interestingly, this is sometimes also found in the metafictional sharing of such stories within the stories.

This collection fulfils all three criteria set by Lemke (2016, p. 18–19) for a precarious text. The portrayal of the precariat is unambiguous, and the distress is clearly visible, although never graphic nor aestheticist. The frequent beginnings in medias res, the quick and sharp drawing of situations interspersed with snippets of narrated monologue, the sparse use of symbol and metaphor – a hero paralleled with the suffering Christ before Easter, another loosening a noose from a cleat with a face painted on it – elicit an unsettling effect at the same time that they invite the (most probably middle-class) reader to partake of the characters' woes.

Furthermore, this collection is peopled with very many persons and their stories – and stories within the stories – in a manner that brings forth the abundance of precarious subjects and lives. The sheer number of persons, their geographical proximity and the short story collection as a genre encourage a reading of the individual characters and stories as neighbouring – not necessarily but potentially interconnected. These people, who are barely holding it together yet insist on showing up for each other as best they can, are a potential community that is, however, left to the reader to imagine, bringing together the persons and their resistant small-scale relationships in a call for change.

The Sky of the Palm: The hope of an affective community

The idea of a community with revolutionary potential, whose members cannot realise its possibility because they lack self-recognition (or class consciousness in terms of class analysis) and hope, lies at the heart of Theodoratou's work. The *Sky of the Palm* is a short-story cycle, whose characters cross paths in different stories, often without realising, as they switch places in the protagonist's role. The call on the reader to connect the dots is more prominent here, and, since this is a later work that has witnessed the murderous action of the far right, it is more concerned with showing the shared misery of falsely constructed enemies and hierarchies.

To that effect, violence as a product of precarity is a lot more prominent in this work, as is the question of misplaced allegiance. The collection opens ("Τον ξάφνιασε το αίμα" [Taken Aback by the Blood]) with the blood flowing from the cracked head of a Pakistani. He is beaten by an unemployed who joined the far right to protect himself from his fear, shame and the resentment of his wife. The protagonist also participates in the arson of an immigrant's tricycle and breaks the camera of a woman he thinks to be a rich *voyeur* of the neighbourhood's poverty (revealed in another story to be a recovering drug addict, who cares for an ailing father and is still paying for this camera). By the end of the story however, the man saves some of his humanity and ends up with his own head cracked by the same organisation, when he refuses to beat up a communist who saved his life as a kid when his own father died in a work accident. When the woman with the broken camera meets him as a secondary character in another story ("Το κλείστρο" [The Shutter]), in the hospital next to her dying father, she verbally assaults him for the scumbag he truly is, but she also gives him a little water.

These small and unexpected islands of solidarity are fairly common in this work, and they stand in stark contrast to the resentment and even hatred that typically grow between the couples. Marital bonds do not hold here, as the men prove unable not only to provide for the family, but to even cope with precarity without reverting to drinking, violence, inactivity and depression, or simply leaving the house. Families are under extreme duress, the children's future is compromised by lack of means ("Η φακή κάνει καλό" [Lentils are Good for You]) and shame; one of them commits suicide, revealing his former bullying behaviour to be a result of his poverty and shame ("Ουαί" [Woe]). Women are shown to be more resilient and inventive, taking whatever job they can find, supporting their kids as best they can ("Ουαί"), trying to maintain their dignity by covering their poverty ("Η φακή κάνει καλό"). The idea of 'mancession', pointing out that the last recession affected men particularly adversely (Standing 2011, pp. 60–65) becomes plainly visible in this work, as one of the husbands ends up homeless while another commits suicide.

However, the work makes sure to present precarity as a condition affecting more than a particular group of people, as it brings in the viewpoint of homeless and immigrant protagonists. These are used both for their own experiential value and as defamiliarising effects that crack the certainties and (self-)images of people slightly higher in the social hierarchy. The homeless protagonist of "Να τα πούμε καμιά μέρα" [We Should Get Together Sometime] acts as a distorting mirror held against his former wife and her milieu as he returns briefly to his former house to seek help for another homeless. There is a big gap between his former and his current life and he is now more akin to a mentally ill homeless who killed her assailant than to his former wife. His present includes careful calculations for his choice of abode – making sure to avoid streets where policemen pee on the stuff of the homeless – community kitchens, clothes beyond dirty, the foul smell of his body, a contact for a job that he has no means of writing down. The new reality makes the old one look irrelevant; he remembers his past habits and feelings, but these are plainly useless in a condition that has radically altered his sense of self and relation to the world. He has no way of conveying this to his former family and friends, the words fail him, but even this is inconsequential. He reminds one of Hawthorne's classic "Wakefield" (1835), "the Outcast of the Universe": "individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever." The difference between 1835 and now is that those systems of belonging, like work and family, are

frailer than ever and no one is guaranteed a place. His ex-wife shares her fear for her own job: "– They say they will close the shop. – Don't worry, something will happen. – Yes, like in your case!" (Theodoratou, 2021, p. 109).

The live-in Ukrainian woman looking after a bedridden old lady and her intellectually disabled son represents another low in the social scale ("Το ράντζο" [The Camp Bed]). She lost her previous job, she is getting older, she has no social security and no savings, and she currently takes zero days off so she can save her meagre salary for her retirement years. Yet it slowly becomes clear that the family she serves fares no better than herself. Her boss – the lady's other son – has just secured a job as a gravedigger, his own meagre income is barely enough for their necessities, and, lacking the means to hospitalise the disabled son, the mother lets him assail her in the night to keep him from attacking other women. The initial shock and disgust of the caregiver turn into kind help and understanding that goes beyond any help the other son can provide. In both these stories, kindness and resemblance in adversity replace family bonds. Furthermore, long established hierarchies (between people with a household and the homeless, the boss and the employee), are transversed as precarity is creeping into every life. Resolve and connection are the only way forward through ongoing hardship.

Indeed, these stories, like Ikonomou's, rarely have a climactic ending or resolution of some sort. The crisis is constant – an everyday reality, not an exceptional condition. Connell (2021) writes of the "anxious reading" caused by an ever-imminent crisis in precarious texts, extending the affective experience of precarity onto the reader, and certainly both works provide this type of reading experience. The precariat may or may not be a class depending on the analysis, but certainly a lot of the people affected by precarity lack awareness of their shared condition and the potential for collective action, as seems to be the case with most of the characters in both works. Berlant (2011, p. 195) discusses the precariat as an "affective class" bound by a "*sense* of precarity" – particularly recognisable in these texts – that transverses hierarchies without necessarily destabilising them. In this sense, an affective experience that extends to the reader does not only make for potent literature but holds the potential for action. In Theodoratou's work, the reader is invited to see (Wittgensteinian) family resemblances where the characters often don't and share in the precarious experience that transverses the hierarchy between reader and literary characters.

Tell Her: In need of redemption

Ikonomou's latest work – *Πες της* [Tell Her] – is all about transversing. In this composite novella a female courier visits areas rich and poor in Crete and Athens. In the post-pandemic era, people no longer go to the αγορά [the agora, i.e. the marketplace] to shop and meet, so she is like a moving *agora* carrying the stories of people that never meet, bringing together their personal histories summarised in potent snippets of their interactions with her. As she is but a transient figure in their lives, with a typically precarious job of low status, they are presented to her without their social veneer. She sees people in all their awkwardness, vulnerability, and loneliness. There are also funny moments, strange coincidences, weird requests, life in all its unpredictability and, often, lack of sense. There are people from all walks of life, a proper polyphony.

Despite her frequent surprise, making her keep notes of what she sees, the courier faces all these people in a non-judgmental way, forming a transient bond with them. Delivery as a practice skyrocketed during and after the pandemic, and it is emblematic of the seclusion and loneliness that marked this era, as well as of the increase of inequalities effectuated by the implemented policies. Indeed, one of the topmost characteristics of these encounters with people with vast inequalities is their loneliness, their lack of hope, meaning and anticipation for the future. Quite a few of them have precarious jobs, are poor and old and there are a few failed immigrants testifying to the spread of crisis (a couple returning from Canada, a man returning from Malmö, Sweden, where he got sick of watching people jump in front of the trains as a camera supervisor). But even in those who have no economic problems one can perceive a lack of sense in what they do, or say, or receive in their packets that are supposed to fulfil a need; an *aporia* that is found when there is no community to validate life choices, alleviate the pain, witness their existence, offer some form of redemption. They may not all be affected by precarity as such, but they are affected by the competitive socioeconomic system that produces it, and by the concomitant loss of social bond. The protagonist, a nameless precarious subject with deep empathy, traverses their isolation zones to bring this out.

The novella is itself traversed by a storyline in which the courier carries the ashes of a woman – an acquaintance of hers – who died in a car accident, to her mother and her orphaned daughter, on a difficult and dangerous trip through the snow. She is accompanied by her friend Lena, a married hairdresser for whom she holds a special

affection and with whom she shares her stories. The scattering of the ashes in the snow, in the bright night, will provide a much-needed redemption.

The title of the work comes from a motto recurrent throughout the text: 'Tell her I love you very much and I won't do it again': It's the orphaned child's advice on how to make amends. It expresses a need for kindness, forgiveness, and connection that is deeply felt in this novella. From the place of the cover, it stands also as a performative direction to the reader to share her/his own story and be part of the redemptive enterprise of storytelling.

Conclusion

Common in all three works is a feeling of dispossession and loss of belonging that is rooted in the condition of precarity and the neoliberal policies that engendered it. Focusing characteristically on Greek characters, and far less on immigrants, these works bring forth the fact that precarity makes of exiles even the locals, even those who have lived in a place for generations – a parallel with Native Americans is drawn in one of the stories – and makes redundant even those who work in core socioeconomic sectors like construction and health care. By linking economic hardship to the erosion of dignity, identity, and social bonds, these texts make abundantly clear the destructive power of precarity.

At the same time, the texts insist on envisioning the possibility of community, proximity, and belonging. Ikonomou's *Something Will Happen, You'll See* presents precarious subjects whose fractured lives nevertheless contain gestures of solidarity that invite the reader to imagine a latent community. Theodoratou's *The Sky of the Palm* foregrounds the violence and misplaced allegiances that precarity produces, but also gestures toward family resemblances across social hierarchies, urging the recognition of shared vulnerability as a prerequisite for connection. Finally, Ikonomou's *Tell Her* transverses spaces of wealth and poverty, showing that loneliness and dispossession permeate all strata, and suggesting that storytelling itself may become a redemptive act that summons readers into a community of empathy.

In all three works, the genre is instrumental: short story collection, short story cycle, and composite novella, all create a space of separate but possibly – and sometimes actually – interconnected lives, with an abundance of persons that does not let individual differences collapse into sociological clichés or fit in the roles of an all-

encompassing novelistic plot. The parallel lives or intersecting characters dramatise the simultaneity of despair, whilst bestowing upon the reader the work of recognition often denied to its protagonists. Furthermore, the metafictional foregrounding of storytelling as a means of interpersonal connection and resistance takes on an added weight in these precarious texts, making their "anxious reading" a powerful means of reader engagement. Thus, while these works do not offer direct blueprints for resistance, they collectively perform a call: they summon precarious subjects and allies – both within their fictional worlds and among their readership – into an affective community that can resist fragmentation, violence, and despair.

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Chapter 9.

Perceptions of Precarity in Sofi Oksanen's *Dog Park* (*Koirapuisto*)

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Sofi Oksanen's 2019 novel *Dog Park* [*Koirapuisto*] is a historical and psychological exploration of precarious lives. The novel tells the stories of two Ukrainian women and former friends, Olenka and Daria, who meet in a Helsinki park in 2016. Both have worked in Ukraine's fertility industry, spending their adult lives as egg donors and fertility coordinators for Western clients. Now, however, they find themselves in dire straits: Olenka lives a silent, isolated life as a migrant worker and cleaning lady in the Finnish capital, while Daria's health has been devastated by the physical toll of fertility work, leaving her battling cancer.

The "Dog Park" of the title refers to a mundane neighborhood park in Helsinki's Siltasaari district, where locals walk their dogs and socialize. As Olenka and Daria sit in separate corners of the park, silently observing the idyllic scene of a Finnish nuclear family playing with their dog, a sweeping historical drama unfolds. For Olenka, the novel's narrator, reuniting with Daria triggers a flood of memories. Through an inner monologue, she recalls the events that have shaped her life and led her to the moment of narration. Her story transports the reader to post-Soviet Ukraine in the early 1990s, a time of transition from Soviet state communism to a capitalist market economy.

With its rich, "thick" realism – one Danish reviewer compared Oksanen's novel to Charles Dickens' social reportages of poverty and injustice in Victorian London (Thurah, 2021) – *Dog Park* offers a compelling insight into the rise and the organization of the Ukrainian fertility industry, which, until 2022, was the largest in

Europe. Written before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the novel also provides a thought-provoking perspective for understanding some of the historical background of the war, while simultaneously linking these histories to the life of a well-off Finnish family in Helsinki.

Dog Park is a novel that engages with precarity and precarisation on multiple levels: as a meticulously researched historical novel of Ukraine's tumultuous transition from communism to capitalism in the 1990s and early 2000s; as an exposé of the emergence of the Ukrainian fertility industry, Western fertility tourism, and the precarious conditions of Ukrainian fertility workers; and as a portrait of a Ukrainian migrant worker in Helsinki. By grounding the narrative in these specific historical and social contexts, the novel underscores a key point made by the editors of this volume: that precarisation is not merely about unstable or temporary working conditions, but a "multi-compositional process encompassing historical, political-institutional, economic, and other developments that produce or intensify social vulnerability and insecurity" (see Introduction, p. x).

This chapter examines *Dog Park* as a tale of precarity and precarisation in the 21st century, with a particular focus on the novel's depiction of the lives and trajectories of its two main characters. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part situates the novel in the context of Oksanen's recent writings, exploring its engagement with critical aspects of recent Ukrainian history and the transition to a capitalist market economy. The second outlines some key concepts and definitions of precariousness, precarity, precarisation and the precariat from contemporary cultural and sociological theory. The third examines the novel's depiction of Olenka and Daria and their entry into the fertility business. Finally, the fourth part focuses on the novel's time of narration in Helsinki 2016 and its juxtaposition of the precarious lives of the two protagonists with the privileged life in a Nordic welfare society.

A historical novel

Sofi Oksanen is known as an author deeply engaged with the significance of history, particularly the cultural memory of the USSR. Born in 1977 to an Estonian mother and a Finnish father working in the Soviet Union, she grew up in Finland in the 1980s. Her cross-cultural background – rooted in the memories, lives, and fates of her Estonian ancestors under Soviet rule – has profoundly shaped her writing. As an

example, her 2008 prize-winning breakthrough novel, *Purge*, tells the story of three generations of Estonian women subjected to male sexual violence against the backdrop of Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia.

In critical reception, Oksanen is often read as a feminist writer whose novels give voice to female experiences of male violence and sexual exploitation (Hamm, 2013; Witt-Brattström, 2014; Laanes, 2021). As Ebba Witt-Brattström has noted, a central strand of Oksanen's literary poetics is her commitment to "giving a voice to the female body in order to express hitherto repressed, social taboos of sexual experience" (Witt-Brattström, 2014). Oksanen has also identified herself as a postcolonial writer, highlighting Russia's historical role as an empire that has sought to exploit and colonize its European neighbors (Harding, 2015). This aspect of her work is closely tied to her active role as a public intellectual, engaging in contemporary political debates about Russia's war in Ukraine and related discussions on Russian memory politics with regard to the Second World War. In her 2023 essay *Same River Twice: Putin's War Against Women*, Oksanen reflects on the fate of her great-aunt, who was violated by Soviet officers during an interrogation in 1941. She uses this family tragedy as a starting point for a broader discussion of how Russia has systematically used sexual violence as a weapon of imperial warfare – a history now repeating itself in Ukraine (Oksanen, 2023).

Dog Park can also be read as a literary intervention into the cultural memory of Ukraine's recent history, depicting the ongoing struggle between Russification and Westernization, and between Russian neo-imperialism and the Ukrainian struggle for national independence, that has defined post-Soviet Ukraine. However, by focusing on the fertility industry, the novel shifts the postcolonial lens from the Russian-Ukrainian relationship to the relationship between Ukraine and the West. In such a reading, the fertility industry becomes a symbol of another kind of colonization, driven by Western clients and capital, once again reducing the female body to an object of exploitation. In this case, the exploitation is not through rape, sexual abuse, or trafficking – as in Oksanen's earlier works – but through the socially accepted practice of fertility tourism.

In a recent article, I offered a postcolonial and geopolitical reading of *Dog Park* as a reflection of the new geographies and imaginaries of post-Cold War Europe, revealing the entanglements and uneven power structures that emerged between Ukraine and the West after the collapse of communism (Jelsbak 2023). In this

chapter, I propose an alternative reading, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of precarity and precarisation as portrayed through the novel's two main characters.

Dog Park is not told in a straightforward manner. Following a narrative model used in other works by Oksanen (see Mrozewicz, 2016), the story is fragmented into a series of dated entries, shuffled like a deck of cards, intertwining past and present. The plot oscillates between the narrative present – Helsinki in 2016 – and flashbacks to various settings in Olenka's life in Ukraine in the 1990s and 2000s (Snizhne, Dnipro/Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa) before her escape to Helsinki in 2010. By anchoring the action in these specific locations, the novel weaves together a chaotic and traumatic chapter of Ukrainian history as both a collective experience of transition and a personal story of migration and loss.

The historical flashback brings us back to post-Soviet Ukraine during the early days of independence in the 1990s: Olenka grew up in Tallinn in Soviet Estonia, as the daughter of an Estonian mother and a Ukrainian father. After the collapse of the USSR, the family resettled in the father's town of birth, Snizhne in the Donbas Region in Eastern Ukraine, driven by the father's dream of the new possibilities for private business in this region, which in Soviet space was the center of the coal industry. In Snizhne, the father teams up with his old friend Maksim Sokolov (the father of Daria), and together the two men become business partners in the chaotic mafia economy emerging after the collapse of the Soviet state. Eventually, both men are killed in the brutal battle for former state properties characterizing the transition to "oligarch" capitalism in Ukraine.

Olenka and Daria, in turn, make their professional careers in the emerging Ukrainian fertility industry, offering egg donation and surrogacy services to Western clients and members of the new Ukrainian oligarch elite. As the story unfolds, we learn that Olenka's and Daria's former work as egg donors is also what constitutes the connection to the Finnish family in the opening scene, whose family joy is based on the reproductive labor of the two women.

As Markku Lehtimäki notes in the only existing monograph on Oksanen's writing, *Dog Park* may be characterized as a "didactic" novel that wants to say something about topical social and political questions and problems (Lehtimäki, 2022, p. 328). The novel depicts Ukraine's transition to market capitalism as a violent historical

rupture that not only paved the way for national freedom and independence but also produced new kinds of precarity and new structures of subordination and inequality.

On the cover of the English edition from 2021, a blurb from *The Guardian* presents *Dog Park* as a historical thriller about "A post-Soviet state where gangsters rule and the exploitation of the female body is big business." No doubt, *Dog Park* may be characterized as a story about the exploitation of the female body, and yet this summary only presents one side of the coin, as this is not only a novel about gangsters in post-Soviet Ukraine, but also a novel about the life of a well-off Scandinavian nuclear family and the consequences of Western fertility tourism on the lives of Ukrainian fertility workers. This is what makes it relevant to read *Dog Park* as a novel about precarity.

Perceptions of precarity

Within recent cultural theory and cultural studies, there is a tendency to employ broad, universalising concepts of precarity, seeing precariousness as a fundamental condition of human existence. In her influential book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler argues that all human lives share a fundamental vulnerability that becomes politically distributed in unequal ways. "Precariousness," in Butler's theory, refers to the shared, universal human condition of bodily vulnerability, dependency, and exposure to others, whereas "precarity" signals the uneven political distribution of that vulnerability – the fact that some populations are made more exposed to violence, deprivation, or ungrievability than others (Butler, 2004). Butler makes it into a broad philosophical claim that everyone is precarious – as a mere consequence of our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance. Precarity, on the other hand, depends upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions (Butler 2012, 148). If precariousness is existential, precarity involves ethical and political reflections of our responsibility for the lives and sufferings of others.

The editors of this volume propose the term precarisation to designate the multidimensional processes by which precarity is produced, particularly in relation to working life. Precarisation is linked to and generated by capitalism – both in its contemporary neoliberal and globalised forms and in its earlier historical configurations (see Introduction). The relevance of such a concept of precarisation

becomes clear in the case of Sofi Oksanen's *Dog Park*. Through its detailed historical realism and stark depictions of the material dimensions of precarious lives, Oksanen's novel challenges philosophical notions of precariousness as a shared and universal human condition. The experiences of unsafety and vulnerability are vastly different for impoverished Ukrainian women forced to commodify their bodies than they are for the affluent Western clients turning to the fertility industry for assistance in becoming parents. Furthermore, by situating the novel's action in the specific historical and geographical contexts of post-Soviet Ukraine and contemporary Finland, Oksanen aligns with scholars who argue that precarisation is always mediated and shaped by specific national, geo-cultural, and historical conditions (Breman and van der Linden, 2014; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008).

A particularly compelling aspect of *Dog Park* is its exploration of how experiences of precarity and precariousness are inherently gendered experiences. In a recent interview, Oksanen described her main field of interest as a writer as "the backstage" or "kitchen region" of history – that is, the ways in which historical events and conflicts affect the daily lives of ordinary people, especially women (Oksanen and Stock, 2022). Oksanen's novels are usually psychological novels that explore the affective and bodily experiences of history, using the female body as a metaphorical site of memory. Yet, in *Dog Park*, Oksanen develops this feminist strand of her poetics into a new critical dimension by addressing the transnational fertility industry as both a social institution and a producer of inequality and precarity.

Within sociological theory, the precariat has been defined as a global social class in 21st century societies, characterized by unstable job situations, social insecurity, and a lack of organization (Standing, 2011; Savage, 2015). According to Guy Standing, the precariat is characterized by its "truncated status" with regard to social and economic security and other privileges (Standing, 2011, p. 8). Unlike the male industrial proletariat of the 20th century, members of the 21st-century precariat do not organize, do not feel part of working communities, and have no hope for a better future for themselves or their children.

Much of the sociological research into the precariat as a distinct social class in 21st century society has been guided by a Western perspective, viewing precarity as a consequence of the transition from "Fordist" to "post-Fordist" capitalism and the neoliberal reforms of Western welfare states and labor markets in the late 20th century. Oksanen's novel challenges this Western bias by imagining how precarity is

experienced in a post-communist country and by focusing on the precarious work of Ukrainian fertility workers – a social group rarely mentioned in the literature on precarity.

A tale of transition

The novel opens with Olenka returning to Ukraine after a brief, failed stint as a model in Paris. She is in desperate need of a job to support her family, who live in the port city of Mykolaiv in Southern Ukraine. In this post-industrial area, job opportunities for a young woman are scarce. Eventually, Olenka is recruited as an egg donor at a fertility agency in Dnipro (formerly Dnipropetrovsk). Later, she is promoted to the position of coordinator and local managing director, and in this role, she hires Daria Sokolova as an egg donor.

Since the death of their father, the Sokolov family has lived in poverty, and Daria is willing to do whatever it takes to secure their future. With her attractive appearance and fertile body, she soon becomes one of the agency's most sought-after donors, her first clients being the Finnish couple from the novel's opening scene.

As coordinator in the business, Olenka serves as an intermediary between Slavic fertility workers and Western clients seeking treatment in Ukraine. In this role, she becomes both a witness to and a participant in Ukraine's transition to a Western capitalist economy. She observes the arrival of new Radisson hotels in Ukrainian cities, catering to the influx of American fertility tourists: "Once they stepped into the lobby, clients believed they were almost in Europe, and I felt the same way" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 67). In Post-Soviet Ukraine, the old, yellowed hotel registration cards and musty smells of Soviet times are gone. Olenka is particularly attuned to the Scandinavian clients: "Scandinavian noses were sensitive: they always complained about the cleaning products in the hotels and the smell of chlorine in the water" (Oksanen, 2021, pp. 94–95).

Yet the emerging fertility market also creates new structures of dominance and exploitation. Ukraine's liberal legal framework facilitates an unprecedented commodification of the female body. At the fertility agency, the Western clients are invited to browse portfolios of potential donors—referred to as 'little birds' or 'angels' in industry jargon—to select the genetic material for their future children. In a pivotal scene, Daria undergoes a detailed physical examination by the woman

of the Finnish couple, who wants to assess the athletic potential of her genes. The scene satirically underscores the subjugated position of the fertility workers: the Finnish woman orders Daria to undress and perform the splits, and Daria obeys, acting "like a well-trained horse" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 59). The Finnish couple, former gymnasts, prioritise physical talent in their future children. As Olenka notes, "For them, physical talent was a priority worth paying for" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 59). Here, fertility tourism takes on the characteristics of eugenics, coupled with a Western nostalgia for Eastern Bloc athletics:

> "I loved Nadia Comăneci. The gymnast," the woman said. "I wanted to be just like her. You have so many gifted athletes over here." I held back my retort by biting my lip. I didn't point out that Comăneci was not from Ukraine but rather Ceaușescu's Romania, where this woman never would have wanted to live. (Oksanen, 2021, p. 59)

Becoming an egg donor involves more than submitting one's body to the whims and demands of Western clients; it also requires the manipulation of personal and family histories to avoid any associations that might unsettle the clientele. When compiling the portfolios of the donors, any indication of an unhealthy lifestyle, exposure to pollution, illness, or criminality in the family must be omitted. This is why the name of Snizhne – the "backwater" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 202) of their adolescence – as well as the circumstances of the deaths of their fathers are erased from their biographies. The fertility industry operates not only through the manipulation of egg cells and embryos but also through the remodeling of Ukrainian social reality, history, and memory.

Despite her successful career and assimilation into Western norms and standards, Olenka cannot escape her past. More specifically, she remains haunted by the legacy of her father, who was killed during the 1990s in the brutal struggle for control of former state coal mines in Snizhne. As part of a complex crime subplot woven into the novel, Olenka becomes entangled in the revenge killing of her client, Viktor Kravets – the son of the Dnipro oligarch, Viles Kravets, who was responsible for her father's murder some twenty years earlier.

As a consequence, Olenka is forced to flee Ukraine. She settles in Helsinki under a new identity (with a Finnish passport), leaving everything behind. In fleeing Ukraine, Olenka not only abandons her comfortable life as the agency's managing director but also her mother and family in Mykolaiv, as well as her fiancé, Roman – a man who works as the right-hand man of Viles Kravets and with whom Olenka is

pregnant. Soon after her escape, she loses the child and finds herself alone in Helsinki.

Precarious bodies

In Helsinki, Olenka lives incognito, with no other contact with her past life or relatives in Ukraine other than through covert phone calls and secret visits from her mother. Her existence cruelly echoes the fate of her Estonian grandmother, who, under Soviet rule, was deported to Siberia without the right to send or receive letters – a punishment she equated to a death sentence. Family trauma repeats itself. For three generations, the family has been victims of history's violence – first communism and then the transition to capitalism – which has turned out to be just as brutal.

To further this historical symbolism, Olenka's precarious situation is framed by pivotal events in Ukrainian history following the Maidan Revolution in February 2014 and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea later that year. From her small apartment in Helsinki, Olenka watches news reports about the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 by Russian-backed separatists on July 17, 2014. This tragedy prompts her to confront her past and reflect on her sense of belonging, as the civilian airliner was shot down in the very Donbas region where she spent her youth and where her father was killed.

The downing of MH17 is also the catalyst that drives Olenka to approach the Finnish family in the dog park. She begins tracking them on social media and observing their weekly visits to the park, eventually learning the names of their two children, Väinö and Aino. When watching the family, she believes she recognizes features of herself and her father in the son's face. From her park bench, Olenka becomes a silent spectator of their family joy: "The park bench became a soft movie theater seat I could sink into and empty my mind. There I could watch the family live their life like a story that could have been mine if everything had gone differently" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 80). On one occasion, the mother even asks Olenka to take a family photo, entirely unaware that she is their former egg donor and fertility coordinator. Olenka complies, reflecting: "I captured the winter landscape and their moment of radiant family bliss in a way that only a person who lacks such a dream can do" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 82).

When Daria appears in the park, a psychological power struggle ensues, with Daria mocking her former friend and employee for her humble circumstances, and Olenka fearing that Daria has come to blackmail her or reveal her hiding place to the Kravets family. It turns out, however, that Daria has not come to Helsinki to settle scores with Olenka but rather to execute a desperate plan: to kidnap 'her' Finnish daughter, Aino, and bring her back to Ukraine.

The precarious and "truncated" status of the two women's lives is conveyed through detailed descriptions of their bodies. Oksanen here employs a metaphorical device familiar from her earlier novels, using the female body as a site of memory and history (Witt-Brattström, 2014). The bodies of the two former "angels" of the fertility industry are now in decline. In her humble existence as a migrant cleaning lady, Olenka has had to abandon the luxury and elegance of her former life. In a symbolic gesture, highly characteristic of Oksanen, the luxury shoes, clothes, and perfume from her time in Dnipro are stored in a suitcase in her Helsinki apartment – serving as a time capsule of her past.

Similarly, Daria's once-healthy and attractive body has been ravaged by the physical toll of her work as an egg donor and the hormone treatments she underwent, which ultimately destroyed her fertility and gave her cancer:

> Daria's teeth were still white, and only her canines showed even the slightest hint of tobacco stains. Still, she couldn't afford to look down on my state of decline. Didn't she realize how she looked? Before, her cuticles had been healthy, her nails her own, without any ridges, their surfaces as flawless as a newborn's. Her fingers were easy to imagine on the strings of a violin. Now there were mourning bands on her nails, her knuckles were chapped, and her previously enviable skin looked as thin as a hotel registration card. (Oksanen, 2021, p. 31)

The two fallen angels of the Ukrainian fertility industry are depicted as devalued bodies that have lost their former grace, now wandering the dog park in desperate search of contact with the children they helped bring into the world. The miserable state of Daria's body is even evoked as a symbolic relic of Soviet times, her skin's texture compared to that of a Soviet hotel registration card.

The precarious state of the two former fertility workers is starkly contrasted with the privileged lifestyle of the Finnish family, as mediated through the woman's social media profiles:

> The woman had shared with her followers some memories from the previous summer as an aperitif for the upcoming vacation season. A typical shot of vacation toes: sugar-waxed legs, pedicured nails, heels rasped soft, and nearby a book to signal intellectualism. (Oksanen, 2021, p. 341)

In contrast to this stylised image of Nordic welfare, Olenka and Daria are reduced to the status of invisible second-class citizens, passive spectators of a life they cannot join. As Olenka notes: "People like us were invisible. The memory of our faces melted like snow from their minds because none of our clients wanted to remember our existence" (Oksanen, 2021, p. 82). In this depiction, their precarious state is rendered as a condition of existential instability, hovering on the very verge of non-existence.

The cover of the Finnish original edition visually reinforces this point, depicting a young woman's face – one side covered by a solid piece of coal, the other dissolving into smoke. Both elements allude to Ukraine's status as a country rich in natural resources, open to exploitation. After their fathers' deaths in the coal industry, the daughters had no choice but to sell their own bodies to the fertility industry. In this connection, one might wonder why Oksanen chose the dog park as the novel's narrative setting and the main Nordic location. One answer is to interpret the pastoral, Arcadian winter landscape of the park as a condensed reflection of Olenka's imagination of the Nordic welfare state and lifestyle. When Olenka first enters the park, she notices its utopian and inaccessible character:

> The first time, I ventured into the park under the merciful cover of darkness. Creeping along, I approached the bench where one family member often sat. I sat down cautiously, as if the slats were glass, and took in the landscape, their landscape, imagining what their life must be like in a country where dogs had their own parks, better maintained than the public spaces in Ukraine. (Oksanen, 2021, p. 80)

As Lehtimäki (2022, p. 337) notes, the dog park is characterized as a place of social exclusion. However, in relation to the fertility industry, the topos of the dog park takes on an even darker meaning. The practice of fertility tourism, as depicted in the novel, has led to the total commodification of life and human reproduction, allowing Western clients to browse catalogues of Slavic donors and select the genetic material for their future children. Through these processes, human reproduction and parenthood are commodified to such an extent that the process of bringing a child into the world becomes analogous to acquiring a pet.

Conclusion

In a 2022 interview, Oksanen described how the idea for *Dog Park* arose from a desire to investigate how corruption affects a society (Oksanen and Stock, 2022). In Western Europe, and perhaps especially within the Nordic countries, there is a tendency to perceive corruption as an exotic phenomenon, one completely detached from Nordic societies. *Dog Park* undermines such myths of Nordic exceptionalism or self-complacency by exposing the deep entanglements between these seemingly separate worlds.

Using the transnational fertility industry as a *pars pro toto* for the broader history of Post-communist Ukraine, Oksanen's novel explores how structures of global capitalism shape the intimate lives of individuals and the circumstances under which precarity and precariousness are produced. With its transnational perspective, *Dog Park* invites readers to reflect on how Ukrainian experiences of precarity and suffering are also connected to Nordic privileges.

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Chapter 10.

Writing the Memory of Labour Precarisation in China:

The Case of the Dongbei Renaissance

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Precarity is, as Hillebrand (2023, p. 24) puts it, "a master concept for the contemporary," and China is "a core crucible for current thinking about precarity." In this sense, it is increasingly clear that China, especially now that it strives to emerge as a model of governance of capitalism and globalisation, is not just a local case or example to examine precarity as a general condition, but a model to see how precarity unfolds in the globalised present. The impact of the market reforms inaugurated in the country in the late 1970s is the basic starting point to analyse the process through which precarisation has come into being and the effect it has had on people's conscience and imagination.

This chapter explores how Chinese writers captured this process, particularly the precarisation of labour caused by the closure or privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the 1990s. After introductory snapshots into the literary landscape of the 2000s and 2010s and how it responded to these events, we will then move to a closer investigation of a recent artistic and literary phenomenon, known as the "Dongbei Renaissance" (*Dongbei wenyi fuxing*). We have chosen to focus on writers grouped under this denomination (which also encompasses cinema and music) because they have given voice and visibility to two generations marked by the trauma of precariousness: the old working class once belonging to SOEs, and their children, the so-called second-generation poor (*qiong er dai*). Furthermore, the younger authors of the "Dongbei Renaissance" have experimented with genre and

style as well. They have not only adopted and creatively readapted forms of socially committed realism, which was revived in the 2000s in the form of a new critical realism. Less expectedly, perhaps, they have also ventured into other genres, particularly noir, dealing with the history of the 1990s reforms as if it were a crime story and forcing the reader to piece together the fragments of a lost memory.

The precarisation of post-Mao China

The reform policy was inaugurated in 1978 and originally concentrated on the de-collectivisation of the land, opening the economy to foreign investments and a limited but substantial degree of managerial autonomy for the SOEs. In the 1990s, it reached a whole new stage with the "restructuring" (*gaizhi*) process, which saw a rationalisation of state control over enterprises. While the biggest ones were maintained, many others were closed, mainly but not exclusively in the Northeast (Dongbei), as their managing system had become unprofitable and uncompetitive for the new ambitions of Chinese capitalism (as it turned out, this privatisation drive was instrumental to securing China's entry into the WTO in 2001). In fact, the 500 largest SOEs controlled 37% of the state's industrial assets and alone accounted for more than half of the profits made by the state sector of the economy; by contrast, more than 70% of smaller, local SOEs were doing badly in an economy that was increasingly acting according to the rules of the market (Garnaut, Song and Yao, 2006). The surviving SOEs had to adapt to those rules, while some underwent total or partial privatisation (Naughton, 2007).

In addition to significantly reducing the role of state planning, this process also undermined social welfare and labour rights. Up until that moment, SOEs were organised as "work units" (*danwei*), whose duty was also to provide workers with social rights that included housing, medical care and schooling for children. This system of "industrial citizenship" (Andreas, 2019) granted workers the security of lifelong employment, generally with the promise of passing it on to their children. The "restructuring" of the SOEs also implied the dismantling of the work unit system, producing massive layoffs and seriously depauperising working-class communities. Adding on top of the fast-growing mass of migrant labourers moving to the cities from rural areas to look for better income prospects, this process completely changed the composition and material reality of the Chinese working class, now subjected to exploitative conditions and unstable jobs and salaries. While

the Labour Contract Law of 2008 attempted to mitigate this situation, many of its provisions remained on paper only.

The response of "subaltern" literatures

One of the writers who most forcefully captured the precarisation of labour was Cao Zhenglu (1949–2021). His most influential novella, "There," sparked intense debates after it was published in the literary journal *Contemporary* in 2004. The protagonist, Zhu Weiguo, is a leader of the state-affiliated union in a SOE, who finds himself in the uneasy position of having to both stand up for workers facing the dismantling of their workplace and deal with bureaucratic authorities who are unwilling to compromise. Isolated and disheartened, Zhu Weiguo eventually commits suicide. This ending dramatically symbolises the collapse of the previous socio-economic (and ideological) order, with Zhu Weiguo embodying those who, in Li Yunlei's (2014, p. 103) words, have been "reform-ed" and "have paid the price for it." In fact, the irresolvable contradiction Zhu Weiguo finds himself in, as well as its (self-) destructive outcome, can be interpreted as a critique of the liberalisation wave of the 1990s.

"There" is frequently credited with inaugurating a stream of novels and short stories grouped under the umbrella term of "subaltern literature" (*diceng wenxue*). Its defining term, *diceng*, commonly translated as "subaltern," literally refers to the "lower strata" of society. It was adopted to stand in direct opposition to "pure literature" (*chun wenxue*), considered the dominant strain of literary production since the 1980s, based on introspection and abstraction instead of social issues (Li, 2014). During the 2000s and early 2010s, authors styled as "subaltern literature," such as Hu Xuewen (b. 1967), Liu Jiming (b. 1963), Wang Xiangfu (b. 1958) and Wu Jun (b. 1969), depicted themes such as factory closures, lay-offs, mining communities, urban-rural imbalances, gender inequality, and outcasts of society, such as prostitutes and peddlers, to highlight the precarity and vulnerability rampant in the new market economy (Lu, 2012).

Authors of "subaltern literature" were not really "subaltern" themselves, but mostly professional writers, literary critics, and intellectuals interested in reviving a socially critical literature. However, their themes were closely connected to those found in the poetry written by rural-urban migrant workers (*dagong shige*), another phenomenon that had been growing under the academic radar and outside the main

editorial circuits, eventually attracting considerable public attention (Picerni, 2026; van Crevel, 2017, 2026). One of the most visible representatives of this poetry, Zheng Xiaoqiong (b. 1980), vividly portrayed the lives and exploitation of factory workers in Southern China's export-oriented manufacturing industry, with particular attention to women workers (Gong, 2021; Jaguścik, 2019; Zhou, 2021). The material reality of industrial labour is brought into her poetry with ample technical vocabulary, but also through the image of the labouring body's exhaustion and even dismemberment on the assembly line. The dehumanising working conditions, sense of alienation, anomie in a strongly exclusionary urban space, and other similar aspects that emerge from migrant workers' poetry clearly articulate a critique of the precarity of the living conditions of Chinese workers today. Addressing these themes allowed migrant workers' poetry to also perform a sort of "self-ethnography" (Sun, 2014, p. 192) that counters the superficial representations of workers' lives in mainstream media (Dooling, 2017).

While some of these accounts and stories, starting with Cao Zhenglu's "There" itself, were outspoken in denouncing the contradictions caused by market reforms, they could be published thanks to the peculiar political climate of the time. The party-state's stated effort to create a "harmonious society" and the relative academic openness of the 2000s encouraged intellectual debates on pressing social concerns. In fact, rather than being censored, migrant workers' poetry was largely absorbed into the cultural establishment, published by literary journals and discussed in the academic sphere (Sun, 2014, p. 216), with some poets, including the aforementioned Zheng Xiaoqiong, obtaining editorial or cultural jobs that allowed them to leave their previous workplaces.

21st-century precarisation: new stories, old memories

While these writers were clearly intent on elaborating a socially critical literature that could reflect on the negative consequences of market reforms, authors during the 2000s and early 2010s also focused on how individuals responded to these changes, blending observation, personal experience, and fictional imagination, not necessarily softening the critical edge. One of the most successful of these writers is Xu Zechen (b. 1978). His bittersweet stories see young rural migrants striving to assert their agency and achieve their self-realisation in Beijing, showing yet another side of precarity, namely migrants' atomisation in the urban space, which they try to combat

by forging new friendships and affective ties amongst themselves (Picerni, 2019). While these "adventurers" are overwhelmingly male and their networks strongly homosocial (Hunt, 2016, 2022), another coeval author, Sheng Keyi (b. 1973), has focused instead on migrant girls and women. In her two masterpieces, *Northern Girls* and *Wild Fruit* (the latter was quickly censored in mainland China), Sheng Keyi showed the hyper-sexualisation working women are subject to once they reach the bustling cities of the industrial South (Schaffer and Song, 2017). In their case, gender hierarchy and sexual discrimination pile up on the already existing stigma and exploitation suffered by migrant workers in general. Notably, in the vast majority of both Xu Zechen's and Sheng Keyi's stories, structural impediments eventually prevail, and their characters are frustrated or defeated, thus showing the limits of individual emancipation from precarity under a social system designed to perpetuate it.

Both these authors grew up during the market reform era and hailed from rural areas, with little or no personal memory of "industrial citizenship," as opposed to "subaltern literature" authors. By contrast, *Dinner for Six*, a novel by another coetaneous author, Lu Min (b. 1973), describes the impact of the 1990s privatisations on two urban families, brought together as the respective widowed mother and father start dating, before splitting apart, not incidentally concurrent with the work unit system's collapse. A skillful construction of the characters' psychologies shows how that period influenced two generations: the father, Bogang, an old worker, embodies the forgotten memory of "industrial citizenship," which gets lost as he is suddenly affected by amnesia. His son, Chenggong, is likewise unable to navigate such a disorienting presence and feels a sense of inferiority as the son of a working-class family (on Lu Min's writing, still underresearched in English-language academia, see Li Zhang, 2020).

Although living conditions and salaries have progressively improved during the 2000s and 2010s, the success of certain cultural products, especially digital, attests to the Chinese public's continued interest in the human and social cost of China's economic upsurge. It also reveals the growing anxiety of a growing section of the so-called "middle class" to fall into a precarious condition similar to that of the working class as a result of of the slowdown of growth. In 2017, for example, a memoir written online by a domestic worker in Beijing, Fan Yusu (b. 1973), went viral. It detailed the plights endured by migrant workers and their families, also in providing

education and shelter to their children. In 2023, *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* came out, a print collection of working chronicles previously published online by the former delivery worker Hu Anyan (b. 1979), instantly becoming a bestseller and ushering in a series of nonfictional novels written by ordinary workers, under the label of "new mass literature and art" (*xin dazhong wenyi*).

These authors are classified as *suren*, meaning "non-professional" or "amateur." This implies that they are still committed to their (often manual) jobs and do not write full time, heightening their perceived grassroots authenticity. In their reception, writing becomes both a proof of their resilience in the face of precarious conditions, and a way to showcase these experiences of precarity from those who are still experiencing them firsthand. The fact that these non-professional authors are actively sought after by editors also proves the editorial world's and larger public's appetite for stories about the social ecology generated by thirty or forty years of market reforms.

The list would be even longer if it accounted for the multiple, sometimes subtle ways through which the memory of "industrial citizenship" and the experience of privatisation and precarisation have made their way into the literary works of writers mainly concerned with totally different themes. What this demonstrates, to wit, is the enduring collective trauma left by that process, which is at the core of the new generation of Dongbei writers we will now scrutinise.

The "Dongbei Renaissance," at the intersection of class discourse and generational narrative

The term "Dongbei Renaissance," coined somewhat playfully by the rapper GEM (Dong Baoshi), alludes to the cultural revival of the Northeastern region, also referred to as "China's Rustbelt" (Lee, 2007). The Northeast's resurgence is signalled by a vast movement that includes the rock music of Second Hand Roses (*Ershou Meigui*), films such as *The Piano in the Factory* (2010), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), or the television series *The Long Season* (2023), not to mention the first documentary by director Wang Bing, which made him famous in Europe: *Tiexi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002) (Dai Jinhua and Teng Wei, 2022; Lin Shiqi, 2023). The setting of this film, the Tiexi district in Shenyang, capital of Liaoning province, is also the birthplace of the three most well-known novelists associated with the "Dongbei Renaissance:" Shuang Xuetao (b. 1983), Ban Yu (b. 1986), and Zheng Zhi (b.

1987), "the Three Musketeers of Tiexi," part of the "New Northeast Writers Group" (Lin Yan, 2015; Huang Ping, 2020). In the following pages, we will specifically focus on the works of the two authors Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu.

Shuang Xuetao grew up in the working-class neighborhood of the Tiexi industrial district. His father worked in a tractor factory, loved reading in his spare time, and possessed a certain talent for storytelling, which he passed on to his son. The latter, in fact, while working as a bank clerk, began writing short stories, among them *Moses on the Plain*, the quintessential and iconic text of the "New Northeast Writers Group." As for Ban Yu, he began his career as a music critic before moving on to fiction. His writings are marked by the traumatic memory of his mother's dismissal, followed by that of his father: both parents were factory workers in Tiexi district. The autobiographical element stands out strongly in the works of both Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu. However, before starting our literary analysis, a brief overview of the historical context should be provided, in order to better frame the social background and emotional atmosphere that the "New Northeast Writers" recreate in their short stories.

The three northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, which together account for approximately 14% of China's land area and have a population of nearly 100 million people, form a border region historically subject to the influence of neighboring nations – Russia, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. Due to this strategic position, even before the fall of China's last dynasty (the Qing Empire: 1644–1911), the area of Dongbei, also known as Manchuria, had long been the target of Japan's expansionist ambitions, which succeeded in conquering this vast territory in the early 1930s, initiating its modernisation and industrialisation (Hirata, 2021, 2024). It was after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, during the Mao era, that the Northeast became the flagship of the Chinese heavy industry and a symbol of socialist planned economy, with a very high concentration of SOEs. As early as 1951-1952, the region was producing 70% of the country's steel, more than half of its national oil, and 40% of China's electricity (Hirata, 2021, p. 1086). While the central-eastern coastal area around Shanghai focused on producing consumer goods, Dongbei became famous for its massive steel plants, power stations and industrial infrastructure. Above all, beyond boasting incredible production capacity, Dongbei SOEs had a profound impact on the social fabric,

transforming the lives of millions of people through the socialist institution *par excellence*, the work unit.

As we already pointed out, the work unit was much more than a production entity: the work unit-based industrial citizenship meant an extremely stable social system, where workers were guaranteed lifetime employment, access to housing and medical care, pensions, schooling for their children, and a supportive community to live in. It is not difficult to imagine, then, the impact that the dismantling of the *danwei* system in the 1990s had on the very structure of the working class, as well as on family organisation and the mental health of individuals. Although industrial citizenship had its limits and should not be mistaken for industrial democracy, the transformation of work units into profit-oriented enterprises – resulting in the loss of job security and a long-lasting crisis of class identity – represented a massive trauma (Andreas, 2019; Au, 2011; Hillenbrand, 2023; Lee, 2007; Solinger, 2022).

The reaction to the trauma inflicted by the mid-1990s reforms came almost two decades later, at least in the literary sphere. To quote Huang Ping (2020), the literature of the "Dongbei Renaissance," and in particular "the writings of Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu are like a letter sent twenty years later, meant to console their own fathers, who are now in their sunset years." The generational issue is not a mere detail; on the contrary, it allows us to grasp some key features of this literary movement. First of all, it is the children born mostly in the 1980s who reinterpret and retell the stories of their worker fathers, who were laid off *en masse*. It is as if the fathers experienced an unspeakable trauma that words could not describe, while writing and exposing this collective wound through literature became a natural response for the next generation, whose members were born into the unstable post-Mao era and were often raised in families where at least one parent was unemployed. In their texts, then, class discourse usually takes shape within a generational narrative, powerfully emphasizing the diachronic dimension, the historical trajectory from the stable condition ensured by the *danwei* system to a structural precarity where all the previous rights have been erased. The dramatic transformation of the working class "from master to menial" (Au, 2011), "from master to mendicant" (Solinger, 2022), or from the above-mentioned "industrial citizenship" to the current "zombie citizenship" (Hillenbrand, 2023), is effectively depicted as the passage from one generation to the next.

Secondly, this literary practice dedicated to the fathers' generation certainly serves to console, but even more so, it aims to keep alive the memory of the deep social contradictions created by the reforms, whereas, on the contrary, the official discourse portrays the wave of privatisations following the enactment of the Company Law in 1994 and the new Labour Law in 1995 as an unquestionable step forward, one that in fact paved the way for China's entry into the WTO in 2001. For state media and school textbooks, the marketisation launched in the last decade of the 20th century was a positive process – or, at the very least, it was the outcome of a historical necessity: in this respect, the works of Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, and other figures of the "Dongbei Renaissance" offer a sort of counter-narrative and reactivate an alternative memory.

This kind of alternative memory has also been defined as a "post-memory" (Lin Shiqi, 2023), since it concerns events experienced indirectly, through the perspective of others. In Marianne Hirsch's (2008, p. 103) general definition, "postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu's fiction fall within this definition, as it often stems from a past that continues to inhabit the present and from the refusal to let individual micro-history fall into oblivion. Now, we will take a closer look at how this individual and collective history comes to life in the short stories of these two authors.

Shuang Xuetao: the demise of the *danwei* system as a *noir* story

Our inquiry may begin with a seemingly marginal detail found in a short story by Shuang Xuetao, *The Aviator*. Among the "Three Musketeers of Tiexi," Shuang Xuetao is the most famous abroad, and *The Aviator* has been translated into English (Shuang, 2020). The first-person narrator in the text belongs to the sons' generation, or to the "second-generation poor:" one day he receives a phone call from his aunt, who is worried because her husband has mysteriously disappeared. The nephew, now a low-ranking bank employee in Beijing, returns to the old industrial district of Tiexi where he was born, and goes to visit his aunt. The woman, pointing to the urban landscape outside her window, says all her misfortune depends on the chimney she sees every day, which is now inactive since the factory has closed. That smokestack looms over the area, blocking any positive energy. She is convinced that her nephew,

having built a career in Beijing, can ask the central government to demolish that industrial ruin, "the cursed chimney:" Xiaofeng, the first-person narrator, of course is unable to help her, but noteworthy is the fantasy of glory surrounding the mere mention of the word "Beijing," as well as the superstition concerning the now-defunct factory.

In *Moses on the Plain*, too, the allegorical use of urban architecture reappears: instead of the "cursed chimney," the scene centres on the removal of Chairman Mao's statue from Red Flag Square in Shenyang. Mao's statue is replaced by a gigantic kitsch bird, though only for a few years, as in the end, Mao is reinstated in his place. These changes in the urban landscape symbolise the fluctuations of official ideology, from Deng Xiaoping's rampant neoliberalism to a certain revival of Mao under Xi Jinping (Yu, 2024, p. 230). Nonetheless, when the statue is removed from the city square, a spontaneous protest breaks out, consisting mainly of elderly SOE workers marching in their work uniforms. Presumably, they are protesting layoffs or withheld pensions; the author describes their sit-in in detail but does not explain the reason for the protest, as it is clear to the Chinese reader. This episode in fact may recall passages from Ching Kwan Lee's seminal book, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, which depicts the massive demonstration launched in Liaoyang in 2002, where workers from about twenty different factories marched together, carrying a big portrait of Mao Zedong. According to Lee (2007, p. x), that was a typical case of "protest of desperation," "in which veteran state workers took their grievances to the street, rather than to the legal system." At that time, some journalists and foreigners said that was the largest mobilization after the Tian'anmen movement in 1989; at any rate, it was not an isolated event: in Liaoning Province alone, more than 9,500 spontaneous demonstrations occurred between 2000 and 2002, because of unpaid wages, missing compensations, or, more generally, cuts to the welfare system.

As for the reference to Mao's figure, both in the actual protests that took place in Dongbei and in Shuang Xuetao's narrative, it expresses a longing for the rights and social stability enjoyed before the reforms, rather than an ideological adherence to Mao's revolutionary thought. Mao Zedong, in fact, embodies the spirit of the Chinese revolution; he was the theorist of continuous revolution, and it was in his name that the slogan "it is right to rebel" was created, but, at the same time, he also represents the reassuring father figure of the socialist state with its institutions, such

as the work unit and the "industrial citizenship." The new precarious workers were not aiming for a regime change, nor did they have a specific political project in mind, and for this reason Lee refers to their action as a "protest of desperation." In *Moses on the Plain*, a political analysis is attempted, though indirectly: the scene of the protest within the text is mediated through the first-person narrator of one of the characters, Zhuang Dezeng, who observes the protest from inside a taxi and comments on it with the taxi driver. Zhuang Dezeng perfectly embodies the type of the shrewd Chinese who always lands on his feet: in the *danwei* era, he had an enviable career without doing much as a white collar in the tobacco factory; then, after 1995, he reinvented himself as a businessman, making a lot of money. Therefore, Zhuang cannot fully understand what is happening in Red Flag Square, and while chatting with the taxi driver, he comments that, in his view, the protest stems from nostalgia. The taxi driver sharply replies that instead it stems from anger: people are angry because they have lost everything. The driver also introduces a powerful metaphor: the elderly workers gathered around Mao's statue are like dolphins: when the sea is polluted, the dolphins commit suicide by swimming upstream to the shore and allowing themselves to die on the beach. Although dolphins are strong and could at least try to fight back, they give up, and their bodies line up on the beach, one after the other.

The fact that this dialogue takes place in a taxi is not a meaningless detail: *Moses on the Plain* is, in fact, a *noir* story centred on a series of murders in which the victims are often taxi drivers. The reader is forced to take on the role of a detective and try to uncover the identity of the serial killer roaming the abandoned industrial district of Tiexi, since the narrative is fragmented, has a non-linear structure, and is told through seven distinct narrators. According to Yu (2024), the choice of the crime genre in neo-Dongbei fiction is much more than a mere literary device: the mystery to be solved is intrinsically tied to the history of the region, it is a puzzle where pieces of the past glory intertwine with the oblivion and despair provoked by the reforms, and its solution can, at least in the literary realm, bring a sense of relief or redemption in the face of that traumatic past.

Furthermore, the plot is inspired by a highly sensational real event, the March 8 Case, in which several taxi drivers were actually murdered by some gangs from Shenyang. The killings went on for over a decade, from 1987 up to 1999, involving more than 70 people; the motive was money, and approximately 3 million yuan were

stolen (Yu, 2024, p. 225). It is worth noting that both the killers and the victims are connected to the social *milieu* of 1990s Shenyang: following the wave of layoffs, crime rates skyrocketed, and also the taxi driving profession became much more common (Solinger, 2022).

If it were possible to find a silver lining in the social carnage that transformed the cradle of the socialist welfare state into China's Rustbelt, it would be perhaps the creative exuberance with which former factory workers invented new forms of employment after the mass layoffs. Those who did not develop an alcohol addiction (a fate that was all too common), had to rely on all their talent to make a living, since state subsidies, and in particular the program known as the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee Scheme (*dibao*), offered only a partial answer to the needs of the urban population impoverished by the so-called modernisation process in the 1990s (Solinger, 2022). This type of creative response to the crisis is masterfully captured in Ban Yu's short stories, which we will now examine.

The survivors of China's Rustbelt in Ban Yu's fictional world

In Ban Yu's fiction, we often encounter characters who jump from one job to another, or invent quite surreal professions. In the first part of his novella *Workers' Village, The Antique* (2018), we read about a man who refuses to leave the old working-class neighborhood, even though most of it has already been demolished, the former residents have nearly all moved away, and only a few stores remain: a barber, a small BBQ restaurant, a sketchy massage parlour, and the protagonist's antique shop. Amid the dust of the many construction sites, and despite the gangs hired by developers to pressure people into relocating, the main character Lao Sun has opened a shop selling old junk, which he passes off as rare and refined antiques. For this purpose, he can even pretend to be an art *connoisseur*, who keeps only trash in the storefront to fool the tourists, while supposedly hiding priceless Ming dynasty treasures in the basement. He is clearly a fraud, and yet, the reader cannot help but admire his creativity, as well as the dark humor woven into the story, since in fact, we could argue that the real antique is Lao Sun himself, and that the whole workers' village is a relic of the old industrial era, a fossil from the 20th century.

Unlike Lao Sun, the protagonist of *Panjin Leopard* (2018), Sun Xuting, is kind and honest. Sun Xuting is the narrator's uncle: once again, the story is told from the point of view of the second generation, which looks at its predecessors with

admiration, but also with a hint of sadness. At the beginning of *Panjin Leopard*, Sun Xuting demonstrates great technical skill when repairing a TV antenna; his natural craftsmanship also sets him apart at the printing factory where he works, earning him the title of model worker, since he is the only one who can operate a newly imported, supposedly very sophisticated machine. Actually, the machine malfunctions, nearly killing Sun Xuting; after the tragic accident, he loses his job and ends up opening a lottery ticket shop. His wife, too, has a turbulent work history: after quitting the factory because of the unpaid wages, she first starts working for a Cantonese-style second-hand clothing store, then moves into the tea trade, and eventually becomes obsessed with *mahjong*. She abandons her husband and son, fleeing home to open an underground *mahjong* parlour in Dalian. By the end of the story, Sun Xuting is threatened by some thugs because of the debts accumulated by his wife, but, at this point, he is no longer willing to back down, so he responds to violence with violence, unleashing a raw, cathartic fury that makes him resemble a leopard – a resemblance due to his rage, but also to the spots of cupping therapy on his body, since he was visiting a traditional Chinese doctor.

In the final pages of *Panjin Leopard*, Ban Yu fully displays his literary talent by blending the epic portrayal of the hero with a humorous reference to Chinese medicine, a detail that prevents the narrative from slipping into rhetoric. His writing is always rich in emotionally charged descriptions, yet his style remains dry and restrained, without a single word wasted, and so, it is no coincidence that he has been praised by one of China's leading literary critics, Li Tuo. According to Li Tuo (2023), Chinese contemporary fiction, the "Dongbei Renaissance," and Ban Yu's works in particular, showcase an unexpected revival of the realist canon as it was practised in the 19th century: it is a resurgence driven by the younger generation of writers, who have already absorbed the modernist technique of the post-Mao era and now are developing their own voice. Li Tuo here refers to the evolution of realism in the history of Chinese fiction, in which, after an initial phase of revisiting and reinventing the 19th century European realist tradition, the following three decades of the Mao era (1949–1978) were dominated by the canon of socialist realism, imposed from above. In the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction to that canon, an avant-garde literature emerged, characterized by the freedom to experiment with new forms of expression, without the duty to represent reality through the sublimating lens of official ideology. These works, often grouped under the umbrella term of modernism, not only discarded references to official ideology, but in many cases also

abandoned direct engagement with reality altogether. The modernist aesthetic is usually associated with the rise of China's middle class; therefore, by contrast, Li Tuo also suggests a connection between this new tide of realism and the condition of the "second-generation poor," into which authors like Ban Yu were born and which often serves as a theme for their fiction. This condition is shared by large segments of the Chinese population, especially in the urban areas, even if it is not easily classifiable: it is a barely visible type of poverty, which has nothing to do with rural destitution, and primarily affects young people in temporary and low-income jobs. In short, this "second-generation poor" could be defined as the precarious generation, and the sons and daughters of the old Dongbei working class embody all its defining traits.

Returning for a moment to the question of realism, this remains a subject of ongoing debate among Chinese critics. While Li Tuo embraces the prevailing interpretation, also advanced by the aforementioned Huang Ping (2020), that the texts of the "Dongbei Renaissance" are rooted in historical reality and carry an evident sociopolitical dimension, Cong Zhichen (2020), for example, argues that this type of narrative is tied above all to personal and family history, rather than to the collective trauma experienced by the working class. So, does the generational discourse replace class analysis? Even if we cannot delve into the debate here, it is nonetheless clear that in these stories of worker fathers and precarious sons, the personal and the political are intertwined in an inextricable way, to the extent that it is impossible to separate the two levels – even from the perspective of literary censorship. In fact, it is worth noting that by centring stories around family dynamics, New Dongbei writers' narratives can explore politically sensitive issues like mass layoffs or job insecurity and make them seem more like familial memories, rather than direct critiques of government policies. Likewise, by focusing on the Dongbei region, these authors can frame broader and controversial historical events as localized problems, as if the dismantling of the *danwei* system and the "second-generation poor" existed only in this specific area. Readers, however, have clearly grasped the universal character and critical meaning of these works, which already gained a strong following in mainland China, beyond the Northeastern provinces, as well as abroad, where the number of translated volumes continues to grow year by year.

Conclusion: A literary grasp on precarisation

What this overview has shown is that China has produced a rich body of socially critical or themed literature since the late 1990s that has documented and interrogated the precarisation of labour through a diverse range of genres and styles. Writers have captured the experience of SOE privatisations, their impact on workers, the new dynamics of urban migration, the moral and psychological challenges of navigating this rapidly changing society. For example, while Ban Yu's mostly critical-realist stories respond to Dongbei's de-industrialisation by vividly showing its changing environments and the accumulated frustration of its increasingly disheartened inhabitants, Shuang Xuetao uses noir to create a deeper emotional engagement with the memory, or rather post-memory, of precarisation. In his stories, industrial citizenship and the socialist *danwei* are the victims of the crime, and the impossibility of identifying a single culprit points to the impossibility of naming state-enforced capitalism as the cause.

The literary instances we have outlined in this chapter show that, in the specific case of China's turn to capitalism while maintaining the façade and partial remains of socialism, literature has provided a space for making sense of the disorientation produced by these transformations. Writers, especially those coming from a working-class background themselves (including the above-mentioned non-professional, "grassroots" authors), have articulated critical perspectives on the social causes and lived effects of precarity. Their thematic and stylistic diversity captures the multiplicity of material and emotional consequences of this process, produces a far more nuanced picture than the official narratives of economic success, and restores dignity and visibility to those who have been left behind.

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Chapter 11.

The Precarious Diary:

Form, Risk, and Resistance in Md Sharif Uddin's Writings

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Born in 1978 in Dilalpur village, Bangladesh, Md Sharif Uddin became one of the most prominent and vocal migrant writers in Singapore. An avid reader with a particular fondness for Bengali writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, he used to manage a small bookstore called Sharif Book Corner. However, after the business failed, he made the difficult decision to seek work abroad, choosing Singapore because it offered a legal pathway to migrant work. He arrived in Singapore in 2008 and subsequently worked in the construction sector. Despite the demanding nature of his job, Sharif began documenting his experiences and observations in diary entries and poems.

Writing became a means of processing and expressing his emotions amid the challenges of migrant life. In 2013, his writing took a significant turn when the Singapore-based Bengali newspaper *Banglar Kantha*, read primarily by migrant workers, issued a call for submissions. After Sharif submitted a poem, the editor, impressed by his work, invited him to contribute further pieces. This led to his regular publication of a "probashi" [expatriate] diary consisting of short stories and poems based on his own experiences and those of fellow migrant workers. These writings were composed in Bengali.

In 2014, Sharif was named a finalist in the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition,[1] and his work began to attract attention from local literary figures, including publishers and fellow writers. As *The Daily Star* reported:

> [A]round the time he stopped writing his diary entries in Bengali, Sharif received a message from a local publisher, Landmark Books, requesting samples of his work. A Bangladeshi acquaintance translated several diary entries and poems into English, which Sharif then submitted. By that time, he had produced around 300 such pieces while working full-time. (*The Daily Star*, 2019)

This encounter led to the publication of *Stranger to Myself: The Diary of a Bangladeshi in Singapore* by Landmark Books in 2017. The volume, which won the 2018 Singapore Book Award for Best Non-Fiction Title, combines prose and poetry written between 2008 and 2016 and chronicles Sharif's experiences as a migrant worker in Singapore. In 2021, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, Sharif published a second volume, *Stranger to My World: The Covid Diary of a Bangladeshi Migrant Worker*.

Literary acclaim, however, offered little protection from the structural vulnerabilities associated with Sharif's status as a migrant worker. In the article "'This Is Totally Unfair': Uddin Md Sharif's Precarious Situation," Singaporean writer and activist Kirsten Han summarized his circumstances in 2024:

> [I]n a termination notice given to Uddin MD Sharif – a poet and writer who has been a migrant worker in Singapore for 16 years – his employer says that the Ministry of Manpower and police advised them to sack him even though he and his company have been on the receiving end of harassment (Han, 2024).

Despite being officially recognized as a victim of scam-related harassment, Sharif ultimately lost his right to remain in the country whose development he had contributed to for sixteen years. His forced departure from Singapore in May 2024 serves as a stark illustration of the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers, even those who have achieved public recognition and literary success. The trajectory of

[1] Since 2014, the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition, initially organized by Shivaji Das and his team, has been held annually in Singapore. Shivaji Das volunteered at Transient Workers Count Too, a non-profit organization that promotes equal treatment for migrant workers in Singapore, and he founded the competition with an all-volunteer team and sought sponsorship and partnership from foreign embassies (including the United States and Canada) and corporations.

Sharif's life – from migrant labourer to celebrated author and, ultimately, to a figure rendered disposable – calls for a theoretical re-examination of the conditions that shaped his experience.

Precarity and inter-Asian migrant workers

The concept of precarity has emerged as a crucial lens through which to understand the changing nature of work, welfare, and security in the neoliberal era. Although initially developed to analyse the erosion of stable employment and social safety nets in the Global North, the applicability and scope of the concept in a global context remain the subject of considerable debate. This chapter intervenes in that debate by examining the contemporary experiences of transnational labour migrants in Asia. It argues that contemporary migration regimes have produced a distinctive and intensified condition of hyper-precarity.

Scholarship on precarity is broadly divided into three competing positions regarding its geographical and historical scope. Early and influential analyses, most notably Guy Standing's formulation of the "precariat," tend to present precarity as a relatively recent phenomenon associated with post-industrial societies in the Global North. A second perspective, acknowledging the limitations of this focus, argues that precarity is now "spilling over" into other geographical regions and social spheres, including the Global South (Lau and Mendes, 2022, p. 35). A third and more fundamental critique challenges the very novelty of the concept outside the Global North, arguing that such frameworks overlook the fact that conditions akin to precariousness have long been a defining feature of life for workers and the urban poor in much of the Global South. As Munck argues, precariousness has often appeared as a "natural condition" in these contexts (Munck, 2013, p. 747; Suliman and Weber, 2018).

This chapter builds on the historical-continuity perspective while arguing that contemporary neoliberal governance has produced a new and structurally embedded form of insecurity. I contend that transnational labour migration within Asia exemplifies both the historical continuity of precarity and its contemporary transformation into a condition of hyper-precarity. Since the 1980s, neoliberal labour markets have intensified older forms of vulnerability and incorporated them into migration regimes that systematically produce insecurity and dependency.

Asian states have systematically institutionalized exploitative forms of dependency through migration governance regimes designed to maximize labour flexibility and facilitate capital accumulation. This system produces hyper-precarity through three interlocking mechanisms: debt bondage generated by exorbitant recruitment fees; exclusion from legal protections through differentiated labour regulations; and forms of immobility and dependency enforced by visa regimes that tie workers to a single employer. Together, these institutional arrangements generate an intensified condition of precarity that exceeds earlier historical forms.

More specifically, transnational migrant workers within Asia constitute a large yet highly vulnerable segment of the regional labour force. More than 69 million intraregional migrants have been compelled to seek employment across borders as a result of economic inequalities, rural poverty, and climate-induced displacement. At the formal level, labour migration is regulated through government-to-government (G2G) agreements, including Bilateral Agreements (BLAs) and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). As Winrock International notes, however, the growing demand for labour migration has also led to the proliferation of private recruitment agencies, complicating regulatory oversight and enforcement (Winrock International, 2024). Major labour-exporting countries – including Myanmar, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines – supply low-wage workers to sectors such as construction in Singapore and Malaysia, domestic work in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and manufacturing in South Korea.

For low-skilled migrant workers, precarity is first intensified by the financial costs of migration itself. As the International Organization for Migration observes, "the financial burden of recruitment fees and other migration-related costs falls disproportionately on migrants," while "84 percent of executives reported that migrant workers asked for salary advances or loans to repay earlier debt or cover costs incurred during their move" (International Organization for Migration, 2023). These expenses include recruitment agency fees, visa-processing charges, transportation costs, medical examinations, and training and orientation programmes (USAID, 2024). Such costs frequently amount to several months' wages and often result in debt bondage, trapping workers in cycles of financial vulnerability before they even begin employment.

The recruitment process itself commonly involves multiple intermediaries, including private recruiters and brokers, further increasing both costs and workers' dependence

on migration infrastructures. As a result, many migrants arrive in destination countries already burdened by substantial debt incurred in securing employment. Their immediate priority is therefore not economic advancement but debt repayment, with the hope that future earnings may eventually improve the circumstances of their families back home.

Upon arrival, migrant workers' often precarious legal status frequently excludes them from social security benefits and labour protections in destination countries, thereby increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Singapore, one of the region's major destinations for migrant labour, provides a telling example. As Dutta argues, "Singapore's statecraft is organized to produce cheap labor supply that propels the unfettered flow of global capital in/to Asia. The health of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore is shaped by its extreme neoliberalism, marked by structural inaccessibility to fundamental labor rights and communicative erasures of claims to labor rights" (Dutta, 2021, p. 1305).

Workers' precarious circumstances are further exacerbated by the temporary nature of their work permits, which are typically tied to a single employer or sector. This arrangement severely restricts labour mobility and renders workers vulnerable to a range of coercive practices, including passport confiscation and other forms of control. As Sherwin Mendoza observes, migrant workers are often "reduced to their labor power, a commodity in a neoliberal market," and are treated as "pliant, disposable, and bereft of subjectivity" (Mendoza, 2019, p. 2). Such institutional arrangements place workers in an acutely disadvantaged position and create conditions in which exploitation can flourish.

Asian migrant workers experience a wide range of abuses, from wage theft to physical and emotional violence. For example, "Vietnamese labour migrants in Thailand have reported regularly working 12-hour days, experiencing dangerous working conditions, not being paid, sexual assault by employers, and employers threatening to report them to the police if they complain" (Denney et al., 2023, p. 12). Similarly, many Southeast Asian domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, "are made vulnerable by being denied labor protection and gaining legal status only as dependents of employers, resulting in the inconsistency of the application of labor standards across households, the despotic power of employers, and vulnerability to abuse. These abuses include overwork, isolation, violence, and underpayment" (Parreñas and Silvey, 2018, p. 437).

In this sense, the precarity experienced by Asian migrant workers extends beyond economic insecurity to encompass spatial and ontological dimensions. This observation aligns with Susan Banki's argument that "precarity of one kind may aggravate other precarities" (Banki, 2013). It also resonates with Banki's concept of the "precarity of place," whereby insecure legal and labour status generates a constant threat to residency, belonging, and social stability. As Banki notes, such spatial precarity entails the ever-present possibility of deportation and the potential "dismantling" of social networks and systems of support (Banki, 2013).

It is within this hostile structural environment that Sharif's literary work must be situated. Viewed collectively, migrant worker writing has emerged as an important literary phenomenon in Singapore over the past two decades. Within this broader movement, Bangladeshi migrant workers have established one of the most vibrant and productive literary communities. Their literary activities are supported by a diverse network of actors, including Singapore-based scholars, local writers, NGOs, diasporic Bengalis who serve as editors and translators, and initiatives such as the annual Migrant Worker Poetry Competition. At the centre of this literary ecosystem stands a small but dedicated group of migrant worker-writers, including Md Mukul Hossine, Zakir Hossain Khokan, and Md Sharif Uddin.

Despite receiving considerable media attention and winning a national book award in Singapore, Sharif's books have attracted relatively little scholarly attention. One reason for this neglect may be their non-fictional form. As Jochen Hellbeck (2005, p. 321) notes, the diary occupies an "uncertain" position "between literary and historical writing, between fictional and documentary, spontaneous and reflected narrative," a hybridity that has often unsettled literary scholars searching for generic and canonical clarity. Following his receipt of the 2018 Singapore Book Award, Sharif remarked: "I don't necessarily consider myself a writer or a poet because I don't follow rules of verse and my writing is very personal" (*The Daily Star*, 2019). This characterization suggests a perceived distinction between personal expression and literary production. At the same time, Sharif's ambivalence toward literary identity coexists with significant literary achievement, creating a productive tension that challenges conventional assumptions about who may legitimately claim the status of "writer" or "poet." By describing his work as "very personal," however, Sharif also reveals the precarious position of a writer who is simultaneously a migrant worker – a tension to which I return in the final section of this chapter.

As a representative case, Sharif exemplifies not only literary talent but also active participation in public discourse surrounding labour, migration, and belonging in Singapore. Each of his books assembles chronologically ordered accounts of migrant worker experience and functions simultaneously as testimony and literary experiment. In what follows, I examine these two volumes in order to analyse the forms of hyper-precarity embedded in Sharif's diary writing, a practice that oscillates between self-documentation and political articulation. Through this process, writing becomes transformative: it reshapes Sharif's political subjectivity and reconfigures his relationship to both himself and the world around him. Yet this transformation remains constrained by the material and existential instability of his social position. The result is a body of work marked by tensions, contradictions, and forms of precarity that should be understood not as aesthetic shortcomings but as formal manifestations of the fragmented realities of migrant workers' lives.

Diary as archive of precarity: Mourning and resistance

In the entry entitled "Diary" in *Stranger to Myself*, Sharif recounts the day of his medical examination before officially beginning work in Singapore in 2008. The passage depicts the act of diary writing within the confined space of a migrant workers' dormitory, where he shares a room with forty other workers:

> My body was no longer ready to sleep. Lying on that three-by-six-foot bed, eyes frozen open, I write this diary in the middle of the night. Maybe one day, every word on each page will be part of the history of Singapore, a witness to the times. Everyone will know about the sacrifices migrant workers make (Sharif, 2017, p. 22).

This passage is particularly illuminating in relation to both the precarity of Sharif's position as a migrant worker and his understanding of diary writing. First, it highlights the temporal and spatial constraints that shape his writing practice. The diary form accommodates such constraints by enabling brief, reflective entries that can be written in the limited time and space available to him. Second, the act of bearing witness through diary writing acquires a sense of urgency, revealing Sharif's awareness that his writing serves as testimony to the precarious conditions of migrant life. At the same time, this context transforms his individual voice into a collective one. His assertion that "Everyone will know about the sacrifices migrant workers make" positions the diary as more than a personal record; it becomes a vehicle for articulating experiences shared by a wider community of workers.

In this respect, Sharif invites readers to become witnesses to lives and struggles that are often overlooked. His diary thus seeks to transcend personal experience and illuminate the broader realities of migrant labour. As Philippe Lejeune (2009, p. 190) observes, by writing a diary, "you call on them as imaginary witnesses to the struggle going on privately: one day, afterwards, they will read about it…their reading will connect them to your agony." For Sharif, diary writing becomes a means of summoning such "imaginary witnesses" to forms of suffering that are systematically obscured by exploitative labour regimes.

In this context, Sharif's first diary collection exhibits a powerful documentary impulse, capturing the lived experiences of migrant workers in Singapore. Through detailed accounts of daily labour, precarious living conditions, interactions with employers and co-workers, and intimate emotional reflections, the text exposes a system in which workers' rights and dignity are routinely undermined. Food and housing emerge as recurring motifs, functioning as symbols of the broader neglect experienced by migrant labourers.

Sharif criticizes the poor quality of the meals provided, lamenting, "I don't need food for royalty, but I can't say this is lunch when there are rotten curries with rice and sometimes a badly flavored piece of fish that isn't edible" (p. 60). He underscores the pervasiveness of the problem by noting that fellow workers share his dissatisfaction: "They told me that most of their food was not good at all" (p. 43). Equally troubling are the dormitory conditions, which are overcrowded, unsanitary, and unstable. Workers are frequently relocated without consultation, reinforcing their status as disposable labour.

This condition is reflected in Sharif's shift from the singular "I" to the collective "we": "After trying work all day, it's much too painful to take all my stuff and change dormitories at night…we don't have any say, not since the day we became labourers. Now, we are no better than inanimate objects thrown around at whim" (p. 107).

Such passages do more than document hardship; they reconstruct the dehumanizing structures that shape migrant labour in Asia. The exhaustion experienced by workers stems not only from physical labour but also from the systems that govern their everyday existence. By adopting a collective voice, Sharif highlights the shared vulnerability of migrant workers and exposes a social order that reduces them to disposable commodities rather than recognizing them as human beings with agency.

At the same time, Sharif's diary is deeply concerned with the idea of home – both in the intimate sense of family and in the broader sense of Bangladesh as a homeland. Here, the text reveals a dual form of precarity: the emotional pain of separation from loved ones and profound disillusionment with a state that fails to protect its citizens. The anguish of absence is compounded by Sharif's perception that the Bangladeshi state is complicit in the exploitation of migrant workers abroad.

This sense of betrayal is powerfully expressed in passages such as: "Our homeland, Bangladesh, is unstable because of its political issues. We, the migrant laborers have chosen a life of slavery because of that" (p. 141), and "Year after year, we spend our lives bearing pain and mental suffering like slaves. Our government fattens itself with our money. They don't care about the workers… we are orphans in a foreign land" (p. 162).

The metaphors of "slaves" and "orphans" encapsulate Sharif's profound sense of abandonment. They suggest not only geographical displacement but also a feeling of institutional neglect. In the entry entitled "Home," Sharif reflects on the consequences of migration, describing how the returning migrant worker discovers that "he has missed the lives of many Springs…his birthplace seems like a foreign land" (p. 132).

Beyond expressing personal grief, these passages can be read as a critique of the broader political economy of labour migration. Sharif suggests that the Bangladeshi state benefits from migrant remittances while offering little support to the workers who generate them. His criticism reflects a broader sentiment among migrant labourers who feel reduced to economic assets both abroad and at home. The collective "we" that recurs throughout these passages further universalizes the experience, presenting it as a shared condition rather than an individual one. By intertwining personal and political estrangement, Sharif's diary moves beyond documentation and becomes a space of both mourning and resistance.

Sharif's resistance emerges not only through his firsthand accounts of migrant labour but also through his persistent questioning of the structures that produce exploitation. Unlike professional writers, he composes his diary irregularly, balancing the exhaustion of full-time labour with the need for self-expression. As his years abroad accumulate, his entries become increasingly emotionally charged. The fragmented nature of the diary reflects the instability of migrant life, while its

emotional intensity conveys the psychological toll of labour and displacement. This rhetorical dimension is especially evident in the entry "Change," where Sharif confronts processes of dehumanization directly:

> I am a worker, not an animal. Maybe my skin color is darker. Maybe my body carries the stench of sweat and toil. Maybe I understand less; maybe I am not "clever". But does that make me untouchable? Is a worker not a human being? Must you suck the blood from our bodies to survive? (p. 65).

> Sharif's repeated use of "Maybe… Maybe… Maybe…" exposes the arbitrariness of the prejudices directed at migrant workers, while the shift to direct accusation – "Must you suck the blood from our bodies to survive?" – foregrounds the exploitative relations that structure migrant labour. These questions resist the passive role often assigned to migrant workers and transform the diary into a counter-narrative that asserts workers' dignity and humanity.

A similar dynamic appears in the entry "Night Duty," where Sharif reflects on the contradictions of migrant labour:

> I've worked for the last six years in Singapore, but what have I achieved? I've built crowds of mansions but still can't build a cottage for myself. Isn't that my failure? Where's the money I've been working for these six years? Where is my dream?... When will I be able to introduce myself to me with dignity? Can you tell me, oh my destiny? (p. 124)

These rhetorical questions oscillate between self-reproach – "Isn't that my failure?" – and structural critique – "Where's the money?" In doing so, they reveal how prolonged exploitation can shape workers' sense of self. The image of constructing "crowds of mansions" while being unable to build even a "cottage" for oneself underscores the profound inequalities generated by migrant labour. Likewise, Sharif's appeal to "destiny" should not be read simply as resignation; it also expresses a desire for recognition and dignity. Taken together, these entries portray migration not as a straightforward path to economic advancement but as a process marked by alienation and dispossession. The worker's labour creates value for others, while the worker's own life remains precarious.

Toward public engagement: The pandemic diary as activist praxis

With the publication of *Stranger to Myself* in 2017, Sharif emerged as an important literary and activist voice not only within Singapore's migrant worker community but also within the country's broader cultural sphere. His growing prominence led to participation in literary festivals, poetry readings, performances, and advocacy initiatives, amplifying migrant workers' voices through both artistic and digital platforms, most notably his widely followed Facebook page. Over time, Sharif's writing evolved in both form and purpose, a development epitomized by his second book, *Stranger to My World: The Covid Diary of a Bangladeshi Migrant Worker* (2021).

Whereas the first collection consists of private and introspective entries, originally written without publication in mind and functioning as acts of personal documentation, mourning, and literary resistance, the second volume marks a turn towards public engagement. Written largely in real time on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic and only later collected in book form, these entries reflect Sharif's transformed role: no longer solely a literary chronicler of migrant workers' experiences, but also a public advocate who uses digital platforms to demand visibility and justice during a moment of crisis.

The immediacy of Facebook enabled his writing to function simultaneously as testimony and protest, bridging the divide between private diary-keeping and collective mobilization. Sharif also extended this engagement into collective organizing, collaborating with fellow migrant worker Omar Faruque Shipon on live Facebook events featuring workers' stories. He further co-founded the online arts competition "Journey by Lorry" in 2022, a migrant-led initiative addressing transportation-related risks faced by workers. The project generated a substantial body of worker-authored writing and artwork that was publicly exhibited and later collected in an anthology published in 2023, thereby transforming lived precarity into a form of cultural advocacy.

A significant shift in Sharif's perspective becomes apparent in the early entry in *Stranger to My World*, "Unsafe Lorry," where he writes: "Adversity and time have changed my mind. I don't care about the beauty of the surroundings anymore. Now I examine what is deep inside" (p. 43). This statement reflects both his literary

development and his growing political engagement. Even the book's subtitle, *The Covid Diary of a Bangladeshi Migrant Worker*, signals a commitment to direct documentation.

Unlike the first volume, the entries are organized as a daily chronicle, ranging from "Day 1: April 2020" to "Last Day of Circuit Breaker (II)." This structure mirrors the temporal experience of Singapore's so-called Circuit Breaker lockdown (7 April–1 June 2020), during which Sharif and large numbers of migrant workers were confined to overcrowded dormitories under continuous quarantine.

In the entry "Day 1: April 2020," Sharif captures the collective atmosphere of the period: "A new chapter begins. This is a life of new experiences. The screams of thousands of workers echo about" (p. 55). While the lockdown suspended non-essential work and prohibited social gatherings, it rendered migrant workers simultaneously hyper-visible as potential carriers of disease and invisible as rights-bearing subjects, denied adequate mobility, income, and access to healthcare.

Sharif's diary records this contradiction with notable clarity: "Uncertainty is a thorn in my side. I find refuge in my diary again. I write unspoken feelings endlessly" (p. 56). In this context, diary writing becomes both a coping mechanism and a political practice, exposing the consequences of policies that reduced workers to objects of risk management while neglecting their needs. The diary's new daily structure – markedly different from the more episodic form of the first volume – formalizes this tension. Each dated entry confronts the state's bureaucratic logic of containment with the lived reality of uncertainty and precarity.

Here, Sharif's diary-writing practice represents a significant evolution in both form and function. Unlike conventional diaries, which primarily serve as private reflections, his entries became public testimonies circulated daily through social media and documenting migrant workers' experiences during the crisis. This approach served three important functions: it created a public record of systemic failures, facilitated practical forms of solidarity, and transformed personal narrative into collective advocacy.

The public nature of Sharif's writing also enabled concrete forms of intervention. By providing real-time updates on conditions in the dormitories, his posts became a means of mobilizing support networks. As he writes: "Many may have noticed that since the Circuit Breaker started, I have been asking various help agencies for

necessary items, including food, for the migrant workers in my dormitory. I have been giving regular updates about this on Facebook" (p. 111).

The convergence of documentation and activism illustrates how Sharif used his position as a prominent migrant worker-writer to connect isolated worker communities with NGOs, volunteers, and advocacy organizations in Singapore. More importantly, Sharif's writing moves beyond documenting events to expose the structures of labour exploitation that shape migrant workers' lives in Singapore. His diary does not merely record personal experiences; it increasingly articulates explicit demands for reform. One example appears in his observation: "There are three problems with the management of workers. I have raised them many times, but I listed them again: unhealthy accommodation, unsuitable travel arrangements, and wasting of workers' time" (p. 79).

In the entry "Covid-19 Eid: 30 July 2020," he poses a series of pointed questions: "I don' know why the government is so angry with us migrant workers. We are more affected by COVID-19 than anyone else. Is this our crime? Are the workers responsible for this? Are the employers not responsible? Do they comply with the benefits stated in their contracts with us?" (p. 215). Later in the volume he concludes: "I don't think we have learnt anything from COVID-19. Everything in the dormitory is going back to the way it was… How enslaved we are in this city" (p. 228).

These passages frame the pandemic not as an isolated crisis but as an intensification of longer-standing forms of structural inequality. Sharif's innovation is therefore twofold: it addresses immediate injustices while simultaneously creating a lasting record that demands accountability from employers, state institutions, and the wider public.

Furthermore, the diary form itself offers a degree of protection from the risks associated with more explicitly activist modes of writing. As Diana Rahim observes:

> [T]o be labelled as an activist in Singapore is incredibly charged, considering the extremely low tolerance the state appears to have for challenges and criticisms to its practices, actions, laws and policies. […] The moment the worker asserts their basic rights, the narrative changes from one of mutual benefit and fraternity, "brothers," to outrage at the lack of "gratitude" these workers display and steps are taken to keep them in check. (Rahim, 2022)

The precarity of writing: Apologies, tensions and survival

Despite the growing recognition of migrant worker writing, particularly that of authors such as Md Sharif Uddin, literary expression remains a precarious undertaking for migrant labourers. On the one hand, these texts constitute an important counter-narrative, giving voice to the struggles, resilience, and aspirations of a marginalized workforce. They not only document the realities of migrant life but also challenge dominant understandings of labour, agency, and belonging.

On the other hand, writing often entails significant risks, especially when it exposes injustice or critiques exploitative social structures. As I have argued in "'They Are Afraid to Write': Bangladeshi Migrant Worker Writers in Singapore" (Zhang, 2025), the literary achievements of figures such as Md Sharif Uddin, Md Mukul Hossine, and Zakir Hossain Khokan have been distinctly double-edged. While these writers have received considerable attention from literary circles and the media, their publications have also generated controversy and, in some cases, adverse consequences. The incorporation of migrant worker writing into Singapore's literary sphere is often conditional and constrained. When such texts directly challenge exploitative labour practices or the neoliberal social order, their authors may face backlash, censorship, or even deportation. Significantly, all three writers discussed here – Zakir Hossain Khokan, Md Mukul Hossine, and Md Sharif Uddin – ultimately left Singapore and returned to Bangladesh.

This tension points to a broader paradox: migrant worker writing is simultaneously celebrated as a cultural achievement and viewed as a potential political threat. The same texts that receive literary awards or attract media attention may also expose their authors to disciplinary measures by employers and state institutions. Such dynamics reveal the limits of performative inclusivity in neoliberal societies, where marginalized voices are welcomed only insofar as they remain non-threatening to existing power structures. This contradiction also shapes Sharif's diary writing itself, producing texts that are fragmented, internally conflicted, and at times contradictory.

As a migrant worker-writer, Sharif is acutely aware of the precariousness of his position as a literary figure. In the prefaces to both of his books, he includes apologetic disclaimers. In *Stranger to Myself*, he writes: "This diary contains the collected fragments of my experiences. It is not my intention to write anything

against homeland or this country. No hurt feelings, please" (Sharif, 2017, p. 13). In the preface to *Stranger to My World*, he writes: "I am sincerely sorry if I have offended any person, organization, or country in painting a picture of my motherland and the life of a migrant worker. My intention is not to discredit anyone. My aim is to express my feelings" (Sharif, 2021, p. 14). These pre-emptive apologies are not merely rhetorical gestures; they can also be understood as strategies of self-preservation within a literary environment in which migrant authors are expected to demonstrate literary talent while avoiding controversy. More broadly, they suggest that narrating precarity is itself a form of labour, one that imposes additional burdens on individuals who are already living under conditions of vulnerability.

In this context, Sharif's diary becomes a site of negotiation in which self-censorship and resistance coexist in uneasy tension. Like many migrant worker-writers, he must balance the imperative to document lived experience against the constant risk of retaliation from employers who control access to employment and from state institutions that regulate mobility and legal status.

The Covid Diary of a Bangladeshi Migrant Worker exemplifies this predicament. Its narrative is marked by discontinuous observations, abrupt shifts in tone, and occasional contradictions. The diary thus emerges as a fragmented text, shaped as much by the need for self-protection as by the desire for self-expression.

At times, Sharif writes with striking vulnerability. Describing the conditions of quarantine, he observes: "I am quarantined in a room of seven by eight metres with eight people. No daylight or fresh air enters the room. Sometimes I keep the door slightly open for a while, evading the eyes of security guards. I peek at the sky" (Sharif, 2021, p. 127). The simple act of opening the door briefly becomes a small but meaningful gesture of resistance. Yet even while documenting such conditions, Sharif often moderates his criticism. Recounting his decision not to provide images of the dormitories to a foreign television channel, he writes: "I will not try to solve things by complaining to the media of any other country. This disrespects the laws of Singapore" (Sharif, 2021, pp. 144–145). This statement can be read as a strategic concession that allows him to articulate grievances while maintaining an appearance of compliance. Similarly, moments of criticism are frequently followed by expressions of gratitude toward the state: "The government came to our side with various important steps. It's a big revelation for us. The government of this country undoubtedly deserves praise. I salute everyone" (Sharif,

2021, p. 170). These movements between criticism and affirmation reveal a text shaped by the constraints under which it is produced. The diary cannot afford either uncompromising dissent or complete silence. This tension is especially evident in the entry "Reaching Justice," where Sharif reflects on the challenges of expressing criticism publicly: "I have expressed my excitement over the good aspects of the government and have criticized the bad. I believe that there is a mixture of good and bad in a society or a country…" (Sharif, 2021, p. 256). This carefully balanced formulation illustrates the precarious position of a migrant worker attempting to voice dissent while remaining legible and acceptable within the structures that govern his life.

Conclusion: The unfinished diary of hyper-precarity

The diaries of Md Sharif Uddin can be read as exemplary "precarious texts" that do more than document the everyday life of a migrant worker; they also embody, contest, and theorize the condition of hyper-precarity that structures contemporary transnational labour migration in Asia. Through their formal fragmentation, generic hybridity, and oscillation between private reflection and public testimony, *Stranger to Myself* (2017) and *Stranger to My World* (2021) transform the diary into a medium of political articulation.

This chapter has shown how Sharif's writing functions as a counter-archive to official narratives of migration and development, exposing the structures that shape migrant workers' lives – from debt bondage and spatial confinement to experiences of abandonment and exclusion. By moving between the intimate "I" and the collective "we," Sharif situates individual experience within broader social and political conditions, revealing how state policies and employer prerogatives reduce workers to what he describes as "disposable objects." His accounts of inadequate food, overcrowded dormitories, and disrupted family relationships demonstrate that precarity is not merely an economic condition but also a social and existential one.

Furthermore, Sharif's development from private diarist to digital activist during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates both the possibilities and the risks of the diary form. His Facebook writings extended beyond literary expression to become instruments of solidarity, documentation, and political critique, demonstrating how moments of crisis can intensify existing forms of inequality and exclusion.

At the same time, this chapter has argued that the contradictions embedded in Sharif's diaries – including their apologetic prefaces, abrupt tonal shifts, and moments of self-censorship – should not be understood as aesthetic weaknesses. Rather, they reflect the conditions under which the texts were produced and can be interpreted as strategies of survival. As Sharif navigates the paradox of being celebrated as a writer while remaining vulnerable as a migrant worker, the diary becomes a site of negotiation between compliance and dissent. In this sense, the act of narrating precarity emerges as a form of labour in its own right, one that places additional burdens on already precarious subjects.

The transnational nature of this precarity becomes especially apparent in Sharif's life after his return to Bangladesh. Following his forced departure from Singapore in May 2024 – a departure linked in part to the visibility that had contributed to his literary recognition – he returned to his hometown and reopened his bookstore. Yet he continues to face significant economic challenges. The income generated by the business has proved insufficient to support his family, including his two children.

This situation highlights the limitations of the migration narratives that promise social mobility through overseas labour. After sixteen years of work abroad, Sharif returned not to economic security but to continued uncertainty. His experience suggests that hyper-precarity is not confined to the host country but may accompany migrant workers across national borders, shaping both migration and return.

Ultimately, Sharif's diaries demonstrate how literary form can mediate political subjectivity under conditions of vulnerability. Through fragmentation, strategic ambiguity, and engagement with digital publics, they create possibilities for agency within structures that seek to constrain it. Yet that agency remains partial and precarious.

Sharif's trajectory also suggests that literary recognition offers limited protection against the systems his writing critiques. Indeed, visibility may itself become a source of vulnerability. As documents produced at the intersection of migration, labour, and literary expression, Sharif's diaries raise broader questions about who is able to speak publicly, under what conditions, and with what consequences. In a context where migrant workers are routinely marginalized, his writing demonstrates that bearing witness is not simply an act of documentation but also a form of resistance.

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Chapter 12.

"A Work of Myriad Communications":

Precarious Labor, Asian Migration, and Literary Form in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2006) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

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This chapter examines two twenty-first-century novels of Asian migration and precarious labor: Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2006), a Bollywood-inspired story about the plight of a young Indian computer programmer who is hired and then fired by a U.S. cyber security firm, and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), a first-person fictional narrative about Vietnamese refugees scraping out a living in Hartford, Connecticut. Both novels recount stories of Asian migration to the U.S., but they depict different forms of precarious labor: in *Transmission*, relatively well-paid digital technology work, and in *On Earth*, extremely low-paid agricultural and service work. The two texts are also written in radically different literary styles: *Transmission*, narrated from a third-person perspective that shuttles between three primary characters, is a satirical fable that aims to puncture the pretensions of high-tech culture and an economy organized around financial speculation and corporate branding. By contrast, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is a gritty, yet lyrical first-person, semi-autobiographical novel that transitions near the end to a series of poetic, aphoristic meditations (the novel itself takes its name from one of Vuong's poems).

Yet despite their significant differences, the novels share some crucial commonalities that make them an insightful pairing. Both recount tales of precarious labor that foreground critical intersections of race, gender, citizenship, and migration. Both novels thus insist that precarity is a matter not only of working conditions, but also of other social and political factors that compound workers' vulnerability to economic and political insecurity. In addition, both novels are hybrid texts – what Kunzru calls "baggy monster[s]" – that blend realism with other literary forms – a speculative fable inspired by Bollywood cinema, in Kunzru's case, and fictionalized memoir and poetic flight, in Vuong's – to underscore the harsh, material dimensions of precarious life while also locating precarity in the context not only of contemporary capitalism, but also of global migration, the history of imperialism, sexual desire, and the politics of race and ethnicity.[1] As such, these novels represent examples of what I have elsewhere called precarious realism: narratives that, in fusing unexpected, divergent, even ostensibly contradictory literary modes to tell stories of contingent immigrant labor, are themselves unstable. The formal precariousness of these texts reflects the effort to depict the volatile state of social life for itinerant workers and the refusal of their stories to resolve into stable forms of class consciousness or narrative closure.[2]

Finally, while both novels depict the cruel contingency of work, they also highlight nascent, fleeting forms of labor resistance – in *Transmission*, in the glitches and gaps that cyber workers can access, and in the case of the protagonist, use to create a virus that, in an allegory of revolution or at least radical disruption, almost brings down the entire internet; and in *On Earth*, in gestures of solidarity among farm workers and the creative accommodation of clients' desires by nail salon workers to elicit substantial gratuities. Precarity in these texts is thus not only a liability, a condition of constraint and vulnerability, although it most certainly is that; precarious workers, these novels suggest, have the capacity to operate within and against the economic regime in which they are caught, to generate forms of solidarity and modes of subterfuge that give them more power than they otherwise seem to have based solely on the circumstances of labor contingency, citizenship, and race that largely govern their existence. In the end, I will suggest, the forms of labor connection,

[1] In an interview with Max Haiven (2013), Kunzru notes: "There's always something of *Tristram Shandy* in every novel; it's a baggy bit, a hybrid monster."

[2] For more on precarious realism, see Joseph Entin (2023).

commonality, conflict, and subversion created by precarious workers in the novels are imagined as processes of ongoing translation – the rearticulation of ideas, gestures, and desire across varied social borders and scales, which at some level serves as an allegory for literature itself.[3]

"A bunch of starving coolies": Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*

Transmission chronicles the rise and fall of Indian computer programmer Arjun Mehta, "a skinny flagpole of a [young man]" (p. 6) with a degree from North Ohka Institute of Technology. When the novel opens, Arjun is living at home with his parents and sister, but signs a contract with Databodies, a global high-tech employment firm that sends him to California, where he eventually secures a position at Virugenix, a global cyber security firm based in Redmond, Washington. The novel's other central characters are Guy Swift, a jet-setting brand management consultant, and Leela Zahir, a Bollywood star with whom Arjun is infatuated. As the novel proceeds, its arc bends towards chaos: Arjun is laid off from Virugenix and in his anger launches a global internet virus via a video clip of Zahir dancing in her best-known film, turning Arjun into a perceived global terrorist; Guy Swift's business tanks and he falls out of elite society; and Zahir disappears from the set of a film she was shooting in Scotland.

It is worth noting that as a post-Y2K, early twenty-first-century story of cyber-capitalism, the primary character is not the elite, cosmopolitan figure of executive and financial success, Guy Swift, whom we first meet soaring above the globe in an airplane and who personifies neoliberal capitalism's preferred image of itself – the seemingly self-activating and self-actualized entrepreneur – but rather Arjun Mehta, the figure of anonymous, everyday digital labor, a member of what Ursula Huws (2014) calls the "cybertariat." The novel is structured by a topographical contrast between high and low, sky and earth, abstract and concrete, fabulistic generality and particularistic detail. Arjun is at once representative – he stands as a generic, perhaps even allegorical, figure of South Asian digital labor – and also a specific person, with a complex personality and story around which the novel turns.

[3] My thoughts about global precarious labor and translation are inspired by Sandro Mezzadra (2007).

The novel's tone is comic and frantic – this is a novel of perpetual, global *motion* with a raucous, almost slapstick, tenor. Yet the eight-page section (the novel does not have numbered chapters) that depicts Arjun's most pointed confrontation with the potentially devastating terms of his precarious employment is marked by a slow, steady realism. The chapter opens as we zoom in on "a figure, a walking man, trudging along the margin of a wide California highway" (p. 37). Zeroing in on Arjun, who first appears unnamed, on the shoulder of a freeway built for speeding cars, this novel of zooming global motion has here slowed down to a laborious walk. We learn that Arjun had been in California for a year, regularly repeating this trek on foot to the closest convenient mart. "He appeared," the narrator notes, "edgy, dispossessed" (p. 37). Relegated to the side of the road, he has been consigned to a marginal universe, a world away from California's canonical suburban life: to Arjun, the family-laden minivans hurtling along the highway were "gleaming projectiles that dopplered past in a rush of noise and doxins, as alien and indifferent as stars" (p. 37). Kunzru seems to be suggesting that the rapid, transnational movement that marks much of the novel's narrative is also linked to discrete, local contexts and struggles.

When Arjun arrives in California, where he expects to start working for an upscale technology firm, he discovers to his dismay that "the job Databodies had guaranteed him was not in fact guaranteed at all" (p. 39). He has signed not with a high-tech firm, but with an employment agency that subcontracts cyber workers to large companies. Rather than receiving a job, Arjun has been resigned (using the lingo of American sports) to "the bench," "waiting to play" alongside three other Indian workers, all of whom are living in a run-down house, each being paid $500 per month, half of which is being taken by Databodies as rent (p. 38). "It quickly became obvious that after he deducted his outgoings, every day he spent on the bench he would be losing money" (p. 39).

Set against scenes of Guy Swift sipping champagne as he jets across the globe earning astronomical consulting fees, Arjun discovers that he and the others are living in a "low-income area"; "The idea of American poverty […] was a new and disturbing paradox, a hint that something ungovernable and threatening lurked beneath the reflective surface of California" (p. 41). Here, in language that evokes the Sunshine state's counter-tradition of noir, in a house on the side of Route 101 in a down-and-out part of California, Arjun has been rendered surplus, a member of what Marx

called "the reserve army of labor": on a temporary visa, unable to drive, he is hemorrhaging what little money he has while waiting for a job that he thought was assured but in fact is not.[4] Several companies interview him and his housemates, but ironically, the circumstances that render him cheap labor also make him unattractive to his potential employers: usually, as soon as they learn that Arjun is "a foreign national on a temporary visa, the [interview] was terminated" (p. 41).

His sole contact with Databodies, Sherry, is a native-born, white American who exudes "the bland superiority of a person whose access to the U.S. labor market was a birthright" (p. 42). In the U.S., Arjun learns, race and class are often mutually reinforcing: "*middle class*" was, he learns "an American word for *white*" (p. 42). Yet over the course of the novel this proves not to be entirely accurate; there are, for instance, white people among the unhoused he sees on the side of the road in California and in a bus station near the end of the novel (p. 198). But Sherry's overlapping whiteness and economic well-being nevertheless confirm the marginal racial and economic status of Arjun and the others on "the bench," and she expresses a subtle, but palpable contempt for them: when she looks at them, one of the unemployed programmers notes, "she sees a bunch of starving coolies" (p. 42). Here, the novel links Arjun's experience to a long history of precarious, indentured Asian labor in the Americas and across the globe.[5] Underscoring the implications, Arjun's friend Chris later notes that Arjun is in the country on one of "those slave visas" (p. 62). The link between "coolie" and "slave" is not incidental, but grounded in historical connections. A term with a disputed, and ultimately uncertain, etymology, the word "coolie" referred to Asian workers – typically Chinese or Indian, but sometimes Japanese – who were brought to the United States, the Caribbean, and South America in the late nineteenth century. The traffic in coolie labor began as slavery was being outlawed (1833 in Britain and across the empire; 1865 in the Southern U.S.) and served to compensate for the loss of enslaved labor on plantations and railroad tracks, in fields, forests, mines and other workplaces. Eric Hayot (2014,

[4] On literary and cinematic noir as "a fantastic convergence of American 'tough-guy' realism, Weimar expressionism, and existentialized Marxism, all focused on unmaking a 'bright, guilty place' (Welles) called Los Angeles," see Mike Davis (1992, p. 18).

[5] Describing contemporary conditions as similar to those in an older stage of capitalism's history is common in literature about precarious labor from other contexts. See, for example, Nilsson (2023, pp. 6–8).

p. 82) notes that coolies "included both free workers and indentured or contract laborers – though in practice many free workers were treated as indentured ones, and indentured or contract ones as little more than slaves."

Coolies were often captured, drugged, or otherwise tricked or forced into their migratory labors. As a racialized, non-native labor force, they suffered from being much more physically, socially, and politically vulnerable than white workers. As an 1860 report on coolie labor by the U.S. House of Representatives declared, "From the moment of his capture, the coolie is a slave" (Hayot, 2014, p. 83). The "coolie" was thus at once a labor regime and a racial designation that ensured a maximal degree of personal vulnerability and economic exploitation through social terms that marked the coolie as less than fully human. Coolies came to serve as a wedge to undercut the bargaining power and autonomy of native, white labor in the face of growing proletarianization.[6] In this way, coolies stood in the eyes of dominant, white U.S. society not only for a "primitive" or "savage" *past*, but also as avatars of an economic *future* in which work was increasingly degraded by the emergence of mass production (Colleen Lye, cited in Hayot, 2014, p. 85).

At the end of his first year in the U.S., Arjun "had made no money, gained nothing at all […] except a new and harder picture of the world" (p. 45). He "had been given credit, and had it withdrawn" (p. 45). What this instills in him is a finer sense of the globe's antipodal social and economic topography, which has two foundational layers: top and bottom. "He knows what lies above him, the sublime mobility of those who travel without ever touching the ground. He has glimpsed what lies below, the other mobility, the forced motion of the shopping-cart pushers, the collectors of cardboard boxes" (p. 45). This is a bifurcated world, increasingly split between the dispossessed, devoid of resources to sustain themselves and relegated from civil society, and economic elites, like Guy Swift, who soar above the fray as they suck up the profits. It is important to note, however, that while Arjun is nowhere near the orbit of the elites above him, he does recognize that there is a population "below" him – the unhoused and truly dispossessed – and as the plot proceeds, Arjun does

[6] "[C]oolie workers represented not only a racial, foreign threat to the well-being and economic stability of existing, 'native' communities of laborers – including emancipated slaves or more recently arrived immigrants from Ireland or Eastern Europe – but that they also came to stand in for the general disenfranchisement of individual workers or small, craft-oriented businesses in the face of shifts toward mass production" (Hayot, 2014, p. 85).

briefly achieve some economic mobility when he acquires a tech job. Moreover, as the novel shows, the entire system is more unstable than it might seem, not only because an individual can slide up or down (Guy Swift certainly suffers a precipitous fall!), but also because the migrant, visa-dependent workers like Arjun are not merely capital's dream of abstract labor, pure labor power stripped of historical specificity that employers can direct as they choose, but in fact "living labor," complex, historically situated subjects who, as the novel shows, have the capacity to throw a wrench in the works.[7]

Arjun is eventually hired as a programmer at Virugenix, where he makes a decent living, but when the company faces a financial squeeze, Arjun is laid off, underscoring his precarity, indeed his disposability. In an attempt to prove his worth to his supervisor, Arjun secretly releases an internet virus featuring a short video segment of his favorite Bollywood star, Leela Zahir, dancing in one of her signature films, which he plans to then defuse. But the video spirals beyond his control, is replicated in several different variations, and eventually comes close to crashing the World Wide Web and several national power grids. Quickly, Arjun shifts from one form of less-than-human Asian figure – the cyber coolie – to another – the cyber terrorist (p. 200).[8] "Sooner or later they would find him," the narrator notes in a close third person rendering of Arjun's thoughts. "They were calling him a terrorist, which meant he would probably just join the ranks of the disappeared, the kneeling figures in the orange suits against whom anything was justified, to whom anything could be done . . . He had tried to act but instead had made himself a nonperson" (p. 148). Here, precarity becomes criminality: vulnerability to the contingency of work, when combined with Arjun's lack of secure citizenship status and his racialized identity as a South Asian man, turns into vulnerability to state-sanctioned violence.

[7] On the distinction between "abstract" and "living labor," see Entin (2023). My thinking here is also inspired by this remark by Sharmila Rudrappa (2010, p. 354): "Guest worker programs that bring Mexicans, Chinese, Central Americans, or Indians into the United States do not want people with their historical, cultural, and social complexities; instead, the intentions of these programs are to import, for a short period of time, abstract workers who are divorced from everything that makes them human. All that is wanted is their capacity to work – a working body that can be plugged in and un-problematically unplugged out of production processes, with no life outside the shop floor."

[8] For more on Arjun as a figure of global terrorism in the post-9/11 context, see Liam Connell (2010).

The novel's second plot – the story of Guy Swift – also offers a commentary on precarious labor. Guy himself is a brand management consultant, whose company, which markets impressionistic ideas grasped almost wholly from thin air by Guy himself, resides in a former sweatshop – a reminder of the physical work that the new information economy only claims it has transcended. Guy himself and his company are ultimately undone by the Leela virus; the final gig that Guy tries but fails to secure is with the Pan Europe Border Agency, or PEBA. Guy's proposal to the PEBA directors is "to promote Europe as somewhere you want to go, but somewhere that's not for everyone . […] An exclusive continent. An *upscale* continent" (p. 239). While Guy is meeting with some of the directors, PEBA is preparing to carry out a "coordinated sweep, aimed at taking five thousand *sans papiers* off the streets" to "[i]dentify them, process them, and return as high a percentage of them as possible to their countries of origin within seventy-two hours" (p. 237). Here, the novel is reminding us that the Global North's economy and society are anchored by multitudes of undocumented, precarious workers subject to increasingly draconian and punitive immigration policies. In a final comic irony, Guy himself, who is drugged while spending the night with a sex worker, is caught up in the PEBA sweep and deported to Albania. Like Arjun, then, Guy is subject to a precarious fall that ends in his categorization as a state criminal.

The book concludes with the disappearance of its three central figures – Arjun, Guy, and Leela. Guy ends up in the wilds of Scotland, where he reemerges after his deportation in a crumbling stone cottage, sporting a full beard and a cable-knit sweater, living off the grid in complete isolation. Guy's downfall as a global mover-and-shaker, and the subversive success of Arjun, who eludes capture and is rumored to appear in various places round the world, often with Leela, the two of them "sometimes seen kissing or holding hands" (p. 276), serve as a rebuke to neoliberal ideology, and the racist, social Darwinian tropes that it perpetuates, which Guy had inherited from his father: "*We* were on top because we were better adapted to the environment of the global city. We took chances and made opportunities for ourselves. We knew how to network, how to manipulate the flows of money and information to produce *results*" (p. 206–7). This supremacist notion of innate racial superiority is the one that he tries to sell as an advertising campaign to PEBA, the enforcement mechanisms of which ironically jettison Guy from European society.

The term "network," which Guy uses to describe the insider social connections he used to build his business empire, is a critical one for *Transmission*, which can aptly be termed a network novel. It is, after all, a novel about the internet, a global network of communication that serves as a crucial infrastructure of contemporary capitalism. But a network can also describe the form of the novel itself, which locates Arjun and the other characters in a web of global economic and social systems. "The network is the figure that defines our period," Kunzru noted in a 2013 interview, "[and the] novel, or fiction more generally, has some pretty big advantages in dealing with this networked reality" (Haiven, 2013). Kunzru continued: "It's always appealed to me to try and use the novel as a way of exploring […] complicated and abstract ideas, rather than having to funnel everything through a domestic story about a character understood as sovereign and individual. There's something very interesting to seeing your characters as nodes on a network and shot through with these larger social and economic forces" (Haiven, 2013). The novel's key figure of labor – the network – thus becomes a figure for literature itself as a form of what Fredric Jameson calls cognitive mapping, that can locate intimate, personal, individual stories in larger narratives of structural and class power. We also might wonder if the network, as an emblem of ligature and connection, perhaps also serves as a metaphor for nascent or potential solidarity. Perhaps this is what novels – especially novels of global labor – can do: not only outline the interpersonal and systemic dynamics of disconnection, difference, and exploitation that keep precarious workers divided and subject to capital's rule, but also chart lines of emergent cooperation and collaboration that could, if more fully realized, provide resources for collective resistance. Kunzru's novel does not depict such resistance, but in demonstrating the world-shaking power of one small act of labor sabotage and tracing lines of precarity that link workers (and the unemployed) across the global system – from Arjun and the other members of the cybertariat to the unhoused people living on the social and economic margins of California and even to Guy himself, whose wealth and prestige collapse like a house of cards – the text invites us to speculate on what might be possible if the global precariat in all their variety could find common cause.

Aching, toxic, underpaid: *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous takes the form of an extended letter from the narrator, Little Dog, to his Vietnamese mother – an epistle that, because she never

learned to read after her school was destroyed by American napalm, she will never absorb. Little Dog, his mother, and Grandmother immigrate to the United States, and the novel recounts Little Dog's youth in Hartford, CT, and his love affair with an opioid-addicted white boy, Trevor. Vuong's novel is a multifaceted text about immigration and displacement; about abuse and the afterlives of imperial war; about motherhood, intergenerational trauma, and memory; it's a tale of queer love and desire, and a portrait of the young gay man as an artist. It is also, significantly, about precarious labor – about agricultural labor performed predominately by undocumented workers, about sex work during the war in Vietnam, about unwaged immigrant labor in urban nail salons.[9]

Little Dog's story unfolds as a tale of labor and desire: he meets Trevor when he gets a job on a tobacco farm north of Hartford during the summer he is fourteen. When he arrives on the first day, the crew – "most of them undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America" working as "seasonal workers [who] followed various crops across the country as they ripened for harvest" (p. 88) – offer him eggs they have cooked for breakfast. The work itself is dangerous, involving machetes, extreme heat, and the possibility of falling from the top level of the barn where the tobacco is dried. The crew communicates in Spanish, which Little Dog doesn't speak, but he finds connection regardless. The "work somehow sutured a fracture inside me," he states. It was "[a] work of unbreakable links and collaboration, each plant cut, picked, lifted and carried from one container to another in such timely harmony that no stalk of tobacco, once taken from the soil, ever touches ground again. A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations" (pp. 90–91). If the entire novel, as a letter to a mother who cannot read, is an impossible form of communication, then labor, too, involves a mode of communication when language fails – a form of collaboration that surpasses the borders of speech to bring workers together. In both these ways, language embodies the limits of understanding and also a form of solidarity beyond those limits.

"[S]miles, hand gestures, silences and hesitations" also mark his relationship with Trevor, whose love for and with the narrator is itself a form of working-class

[9] It is rare for critics or commentators to frame *On Earth* as a labor novel. For a notable exception, see Pamela Fox and Sherry Linkon (2024).

association, which culminates in one of the novel's central sex scenes in the barn as the narrator and Trevor are monitoring the curing tobacco late at night. His first encounters with Trevor constitute unprecedented recognition: "The way he watched me back there in the field. I was seen – I who had seldom been seen by anyone" (p. 96). Yet even as their relationship is transformative, Little Dog underscores the persistence of racial division, and the power of Trevor's whiteness: "[Trevor] was white," the narrator explains. "I never forgot this. He was always white. And I knew this was why there was a space for us" (p. 111). Yet at the same time, the novel complicates any simple reading of whiteness as pure privilege: in this story, Trevor dies from his drug addiction and Little Dog survives to recount their tale.

Little Dog's work experience is echoed and preceded by his mother's labors in a nail salon, an institution which the novel suggests has a crucial place in the immigrant lifeworld as "more than a place of work" (p. 79). Writing in the first-person plural, Little Dog explains that the salon is "a place where our children are raised"; it is "also a kitchen" as well as a "makeshift classroom" (pp. 79–80). But if the salon is a site of collective culture-making, it is also a site of brutal, degraded, precarious labor where "there are no salaries, health care, or contracts, the body being the only material to work with and from" (p. 80). For immigrant women working without any economic security, the salon is "a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones – with or without citizenship – aching, toxic, and underpaid" (pp. 80–81). The history of his mother's work life is embodied in her "callused and blistered" hands, "the wreck and reckoning of a dream" (p. 79). Workers' very bodies serve as emblems of the injurious, exploitative force of hard physical labor and also as carriers of what they are seeking, or following: their "dreams."

Facing an unforgiving, extractive, exhausting regime of physical labor, the immigrant workers in the novel make steady and strategic use of the word "sorry" in often subtle forms of detournement. Sorry, Little Dog observes, "is a tool one uses to pander until the word itself becomes currency. […] It is the lowering of oneself so that the client feels right, superior, and charitable. In the nail salon, one's definition of sorry is deranged into a new word entirely, one that's charged and reused as both power and defacement" (pp. 91–92). Sorry is a signal of supplication, but one that can be transfigured into an unexpected mode of potency. For the farm workers, too, who apologize to their boss, "sorry" becomes a crucial weapon of self-preservation, what

Vuong calls "a passport to remain" – a provisional stay against the "illegality" of being an undocumented immigrant (p. 93). To apologize is to reduce oneself, and thus make the client or boss feel superior, elevated, and perhaps slightly less cruel. Yet the word, which on the surface affirms asymmetries between customers and workers, is used to wrest back a measure of power that laboring people otherwise seem not to have.

Vuong's novel emphasizes the pervasiveness of working-class exploitation, deprivation, and harm, but also care, kindness, reciprocity: the narrator massaging his mother's back after her excruciating days at the nail salon; the use of the greeting "What's Good?" in Hartford's working-class precincts, which, in asking about life beyond hardship, serves as what Little Dog calls "a precious spark we sought and harvested for one another" (p. 214); and Trevor's surprising tenderness towards Little Dog in a moment of vulnerability near the end of the book, which Little Dog experiences as "a kind of mercy" (p. 206). The narrator's relationship with Trevor becomes a kind of analogue for working-class connection more broadly, forged through gestures, touch, and care that crosses even as it never eliminates divisions of race and power.

Vuong is an acclaimed poet who writes with acute attention to detail, image, and linguistic play: the novel, which morphs in one late chapter into what is essentially a long poem, is animated by a commitment to aesthetic beauty as a counterforce to neglect, harm, and violence. Near the end of the book, the narrator notes: "All this time I told myself we were born from war – but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty" (p. 231). In a review of the novel in *The Nation*, Rosemary Ho (2019) asserts: "Neither Vuong nor Little Dog has any delusions about literature as a replacement for collective action, but the book finds itself defending the inherent value of aesthetic experience, even as it explicitly rejects the idea that there is no political import to art." I would argue not only that Vuong's text troubles the opposition between politics and aesthetics, but also that this *is* a political novel which underscores the social and material power of aesthetics – beauty for the sake of justice, social repair, and solidarity. Anna Kornbluh (2024, p. 70) has argued that *On Earth* is a form of autofiction that reproduces what she calls the aesthetics of immediacy which collapse the social world into the self, dissolving the connection between larger structures and personal experience. To the contrary, I contend, the novel in fact links the visceral dimensions of immediate representation to the

structural, mediated force of economic, racial, colonial power. *On Earth* traces those connections, showcasing its own awareness of the constructedness of literary forms and the ways in which the most intimate dynamics of individual desire, life, and labor are always shaped by larger patterns and systems, and vice versa. In the late poetic section, Little Dog offers a defense of literature as a political form, challenging the idea voiced by critics that "great writing 'breaks free' from the political, thereby 'transcending' the barriers of difference, uniting people towards universal truths" (p. 186). Instead, Little Dog contends, writing is a mode of "getting down so low the world offers a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things, the lint suddenly a huge sheet of fog exactly the size of your eyeball" (p. 189). Similar to the manner in which the word "sorry" is repurposed as a form of unlikely power by workers, here the novel suggests that getting "low," narrating small instances and minor stories, can illuminate "a larger vision." Near the end of the book, Little Dog asserts: "I never wanted to build a 'body of work,' but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside the work" (p. 175). Work here might have a double reference – not only the text, but also physical, bodily labor, which is a key ligature binding this novel together.

On Earth is a *bildungsroman* in the form of an epistolary novel – a single, extended letter to Little Dog's mother recounting his growth and development. It is also a postmodern, polyglot, proletarian novel – one that looks back to works by John Steinbeck and Pietro di Donato (both referenced by Little Dog) while offering a meditation on beauty, being, and power in the context of late-stage racial capitalism as experienced by Asian immigrants in a contemporary post-industrial city. The ending sections, which take the form of episodic scenes and poetic meditations more than a continuous narrative thread, are conceptually open-ended, but they also acknowledge closure and limitation. "All freedom is relative – you know too well – and sometimes it's no freedom at all, but simply the cage widening far away from you. […] But I took it anyway, that widening. Because sometimes not seeing the bars is enough" (p. 216). Vuong's book holds out hope in the form of workers' connection, smarts, and beauty, but it is keenly aware of the structural economic, political, and social constraints – the "bars" – that precarious immigrant workers face.

Conclusion: Translation and the multiplicity of precarious labor

Is it possible that the concept of "precarity" is an effort to name not only the pervasive contingency of work, but also the heterogeneity of capital's modes of labor capture and the radical multiplicity of labor itself? Guy Standing's concept of the precariat is a largely Western-Eurocentric figure, based on an idealization of a never-fully-representative image of stable, well-paying industrial work under Fordism; by contrast, the two novels I have examined in this essay suggest that contemporary labor interweaves Global North and South, and that the landscape of work under transnational capitalism is marked by the heterogeneity of labor subsumption, degrees of contingency, and labor's social, political, and cultural variety and complexity. As Sandro Mezzadra (2011, p. 159) notes, rather than offering clearly demarcated lines between stable/precarious, free/unfree, formal/informal work, capitalism's uneven development is marked by a "multiplicity of forms of 'dependent' labor, ranging from slavery to informal labor, from wage labor to formally independent labor." When read together, these two novels suggest the wide range of migratory labor – from high-tech, immaterial, cyber work to low- and no-wage work in agriculture and service work – as well as the ways in which political history and the innate and manifold particularities of "living labor" – diverse in gender, nation, age, race, sexuality, and capacity – complicate capital's aim to translate human capacity into abstract labor, the uniform standard used to maximize control over work and workers and the extraction of surplus value.

These two novels also insist that race and gender, along with migration, are central to contemporary labor. In both novels, migrants from Asia prove critical to economic accumulation in the Euro-American context, and their status as non-white workers makes them vulnerable to exploitation, contingency, and violence, even as whiteness itself proves no guarantee of protection from economic hardship. Arjun is part of a cohort of male cyber workers recruited to work in the U.S., but his employment is contingent and when he is laid off and then resists, he is quickly labeled a "terrorist," making him a target of the post-9/11 Euro-American military apparatus, which demonizes Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians as inherently dangerous and untrustworthy. Little Dog, who immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam with his mother and grandmother, joins a cohort of male farm workers outside Hartford, most of them from Mexico and Central America, and their race and lack of

citizenship mean they labor long, hard hours and live in an encampment of trailers next to the fields, following the harvest. Little Dog's mother's work in the nail salon is organized around her invisibility and supplication to her clients; she earns as long as she confirms their superiority. The precarity of all these workers is in large part a function of their status as racial and national outsiders. Yet it is important to note that precarity is not synonymous with race; there are white Americans in both novels who are among the economically dispossessed and abandoned, most notably Trevor, whose relationship with Little Dog, which is cut short by Trevor's addiction and subsequent death, is one figure for what working-class connection and affiliation can look like across racial and social lines.

Finally, to connect the issue of work in both texts to matters of literary form and process, these novels insist that writing and global labor migration are matters of translation. In *Transmission*, the figure of labor and the novel itself is a network, which refers both to the World Wide Web, which Arjun is employed to help monitor and secure, and also to the transnational web of connections that bring Arjun, Guy, and Leela into the same narrative. In Kunzru's novel, the video meme of Leela circulating across the globe via the internet is a figure for a language that can span borders. It connects but also disrupts; it creates a web of commonality, but one that exposes the fragility of the network itself. It also serves as an image of labor that links the globe, binding it together, but one that always functions as a "ghost in the machine," capable of interrupting, interfering with, challenging capitalist imperatives and the smooth operation of profit accumulation. In *On Earth*, labor on the tobacco farm is "a work of myriad communications"; in the nail salon, work entails the subversive refashioning of the word "sorry" to create connections and curry favor with clients. The novel itself is a letter to a mother who cannot read, but the epistle is written to her nonetheless – a figure of linguistic aspiration and also incommensurability. In Vuong's novel, Little Dog's connection to the other workers depends on establishing a common language of gesture that circumvents the linguistic barriers that divide members of the transnational workforce. In both novels, language is a network of connection and disruption, an emblem of the potentialities and problems of literary form and meaning, and a figure for the ongoing process of translation necessary to begin to fashion forms of solidarity among global precarious workers. Together, these novels suggest that precarity is an increasingly common if highly varied form of structural vulnerability that has the potential to underscore shared social and political conditions, even if the path from

there to collective affiliation is very much up for grabs, a matter of experiments, encounters, and continuous translation.

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Afterword:

Literature, Knowledge, Resistance

Nicklas Freisleben Lund, Christine Hamm, Ingrid Nestås Mathisen & Magnus Nilsson

Read individually, the chapters in this volume offer illuminating examples of precarisation across a range of contexts. Together, they give us access to what the introduction describes as a *perspicuous presentation* of precarisation across literatures.

This afterword has a dual purpose. First, by analysing the cases presented in the volume's chapters, it undertakes a *grammatical* analysis of *precarisation*, examining the criteria that make it meaningful to describe particular situations as instances of precarisation. In doing so, it seeks to elucidate how the meaning of precarisation emerges across diverse literary examples. This analysis invites readers to reflect on and potentially reconsider their own understanding of precarisation as well as its relation to literature.

Second, the afterword engages with a set of key issues in scholarship on literature and precarisation. These include literature's political potentials as well as questions of voice, authority and ethics, and the issue of whether there exists a precarised literary form.

From examples to insights: Tracing the grammar of precarisation

Considered in relation to one another, the cases discussed and analysed in the individual chapters give us access to a perspicuous presentation of precarisation. Examining recurring patterns, distinctions, and tensions across these examples makes

it possible to trace the grammar of precarisation and gain insights into its complexity across languages and national and regional contexts.

A first insight concerns *the uneven manifestation of precarisation*. Although it is a global phenomenon, it does not appear in a uniform manner; rather, the chapters demonstrate that it is mediated by local economic, political, and cultural conditions that shape its particular configurations in specific contexts. Read alongside one another, the chapters produce a picture in which shared features coexist with distinct local and individual variations.

A further insight concerns *the relationship between precarisation and work*. Although the concept of precarisation is centred on work, the chapters show that this relationship is complex and multifaceted. Many contributions examine depictions of atypical forms of employment – such as temporary contracts and gig work – alongside narratives of unemployment, informal labour, and strategic hiring and firing. In this sense, *labour-market precarity* constitutes a central component of precarisation's grammar. At the same time, several chapters foreground the precariousness of work itself, including risks of physical or psychological harm, alienation, and exploitation. *Work precarity* thus emerges as a further, distinct dimension of this grammar.

A related insight concerns *the relational character of precarisation*. In literature, precarity is seldom portrayed as a result only of employment status or working conditions; rather, it emerges through the interplay of multiple factors. This is another crucial aspect of precarisation's grammar: precarity is not treated as a single, isolated condition, but as a phenomenon embedded in broader social relations. Dimensions such as class, gender, migration, and generation recur across several contributions, while others – such as race and geopolitics – appear more selectively. This pattern again stresses that precarisation is both globally pervasive and locally inflected.

A fourth insight concerns *the relationship between precarisation and community*. While some studies have emphasised the potential of precarisation to generate shared forms of vulnerability and solidarity, the analyses collected here reveal a more differentiated picture. In some cases, literature articulates – or even "summons" – forms of collective identification, inviting readers and characters alike to recognise common conditions. In others, precarisation is depicted as a force of fragmentation, producing

isolation, competition, and mistrust, and thereby constraining the possibility of collective agency. Between these poles, many texts register only fragile or tentative forms of connection. Precarisation thus emerges as a process that simultaneously generates possibilities for and obstacles to community formation.

A final insight concerns *the relationship between precarisation and historical experience*. Many of the texts analysed juxtapose present insecurity with earlier forms of stability – whether associated with welfare-state arrangements, Fordist labour regimes, or socialist systems of guaranteed employment. These temporal contrasts do not simply produce narratives of decline but serve to highlight precarisation as a historically produced and politically contingent phenomenon. At the same time, several chapters show that these contrasts are often complicated by the coexistence of insecurity and protection within the same contexts, thereby drawing attention to the unevenness of precarisation across time and social space.

These insights demonstrate that precarisation is best understood not as a fixed social condition, but as a historically contingent and unevenly distributed process articulated differently across contexts and literatures. It affects not only material conditions but also possibilities of representation and community, generating both solidarity and fragmentation. By bringing these variations into view, the analyses collected in this volume thus clarify the shifting relations and distinctions that are part of the grammar of precarisation.

Literary form and the articulation of precarisation

The chapters collected in *Precarisation Across Literatures* give numerous examples of situations that have been identified as descriptions of precarisation. However, they also highlight the formal and aesthetic strategies used to describe these situations.

This gives rise to the following question: How does precarisation condition literary form? Or, to use the theoretical vocabulary of this volume: Does the grammar of precarisation call for particular literary forms, or even necessitate them? In earlier research, several scholars have put forth this type of argument. Liam Connell (2021), for example, claims that there exists a distinct "precarity novel," while Joseph Entin (2023) advances a more qualified position, suggesting that narratives of precarious work in a U.S. context tend to exhibit certain recurring formal features without coalescing into a clearly defined genre.

The essays collected in *Precarisation Across Literatures* complicate any claim that precarisation gives rise to a single, dominant literary form. Rather than converging on a unified template, they reveal a striking plurality of genres, styles, and strategies. In this sense, the volume aligns more closely with Entin's position, but places – on the basis of its comparative perspective – an even greater emphasis on the diversity of formal responses through which precarisation is articulated in different contexts.

At the same time, the chapters confirm that precarisation is not only a thematic concern but also conditions the ways in which literary texts are structured and composed. In more broadly materialist terms, one might say that social conditions exert pressure on literary form: the attempt to make sense of fragmented, unstable, and opaque social realities gives rise to aesthetic strategies capable of rendering such conditions perceptible.

Across the chapters, this results in a wide range of formal approaches. Some texts draw on longer traditions of socially engaged writing, including working-class literature and various forms of realism, thereby emphasising continuity in the effort to represent structural inequality. Others foreground aesthetic rupture. Autofictional narratives, episodic structures, and diary forms tend to shift attention from collective imaginaries to more individualised perspectives, reflecting transformations in labour regimes and subjectivity, as well as the difficulty of representing systemic totalities.

This formal diversity is not only an aesthetic (or ideological) choice but is also shaped by the conditions of literary production. Differences in publishing infrastructures, book markets, cultural institutions, and access to symbolic capital all influence how precarisation is articulated. In several instances, literature thus emerges not only as a representation of precarisation, but as *a practice shaped by it*, as the conditions of writing, publication, and circulation are themselves marked by inequality and insecurity.

Equally important is the role of formal experimentation in registering the experiential dimensions of precarisation. Fragmentation, non-linear temporality, polyphony, and montage disrupt narrative coherence and foreground the instability of precarious lives, making visible both the difficulty of constructing a continuous life narrative and the opacity of the social structures in which such lives are embedded.

In sum, these tendencies suggest that precarisation does not produce a single "precarious form," but a repertoire of formal responses. Some extend existing traditions of socially engaged literature, while others develop new strategies for representing dispersed and unstable social realities. The plurality itself is instructive: it reveals both the persistence of the literary ambition to render social relations intelligible and the changing conditions under which this ambition must now be pursued.

Diagnosis, testimony, and resistance

A central question addressed in *Precarisation Across Literatures* concerns whether literature contributes to resisting or contesting precarisation. The comparative perspective developed here suggests that this question cannot be answered in general terms.

Across the chapters, literary texts are consistently critical of the conditions they depict. They register indignation, loss, and disillusionment, and challenge – at least implicitly – narratives that present precarisation as inevitable or as a beneficial form of "flexibility." In many cases, they historicise these conditions, often framing them as the result of identifiable political and economic processes – such as labour-market deregulation, welfare-state retrenchment, and migration regimes – thereby presenting precarisation as a contingent and contestable phenomenon.

At the same time, however, the analyses show that literature's relationship to resistance is complex. While some texts explicitly engage with traditions of political struggle or seek to mobilise readers, others foreground the limits of collective agency, depicting precarisation as a condition that fragments social relations and constrains the possibility of coordinated response. In still other cases, writing itself emerges as a precarious practice, shaped by institutional and material conditions that restrict authors' capacity to intervene directly in public discourse.

One feature of the material is the relative absence of clearly articulated programmes for political transformation. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, literary texts tend to perform a *diagnostic* function: they illuminate causal relations, render visible otherwise obscured actors and structures, and map the terrain within which political and ethical responses might be imagined. In this sense, literature does not so much

provide strategies for resistance as it clarifies the conditions under which resistance might become thinkable.

At the same time, several chapters highlight forms of response that operate at a different scale. These include interpersonal and "micro-communal" practices – support from friends, family, neighbours, and local institutions – that mitigate the effects of precarisation without necessarily challenging its structural causes. Such responses underscore both the persistence of social bonds and the limits of their capacity to address systemic problems.

Collectively, these insights reinforce the importance of situating precarisation within both local and global frameworks. The chapters demonstrate that precarisation is always mediated by specific historical and institutional contexts, and that forms of resistance must therefore be locally grounded. At the same time, the recurrence of similar dynamics – such as economic globalisation, austerity, and labour-market transformation – points to shared structural conditions that transcend national boundaries.

This dual perspective has important political implications. It suggests that precarisation cannot be reduced to individual failure or local mismanagement but must be understood as a global and relational phenomenon. At the same time, it indicates that no single form of resistance is given or universally adequate: effective responses must be differentiated, attentive to context, and capable of addressing both local and transnational dimensions of insecurity.

In this light, literature performs a specific kind of cultural and analytical work. It registers the lived experience of precarisation, differentiates its effects across social positions, and contributes to making its underlying structures visible. Rather than providing solutions, it opens a space in which precarisation can be recognised as historically produced, socially distributed, and therefore contestable.

What emerges, then, is not a uniform "resistant" function of literature, but a spectrum of possibilities ranging from critique and mobilisation to documentation, testimony, and the exposure of structural constraints. Literature may, under certain conditions, contribute to contesting precarisation, but it may equally register its effects or reveal the difficulty of articulating resistance at all.

Voice, authority, and ethics

Throughout *Precarisation Across Literatures*, the chapters raise questions about how precarious lives are represented: who speaks, from which position, and under what conditions. In this sense, the volume extends a line of inquiry familiar from studies of working-class literature, which has long interrogated the problem of who can legitimately speak for and about marginalised social groups.

The analyses demonstrate that the capacity to articulate precarisation is itself unevenly distributed. In some cases, literary texts draw on forms of insider testimony, foregrounding lived experience and claiming authority through proximity. In others, precarisation is mediated by authors who occupy more privileged positions, giving rise to tensions between identification and distance. Several contributions explicitly reflect on these asymmetries, showing how literature is shaped by differences in cultural capital, institutional access, and authorial position.

At the same time, the volume highlights a range of strategies through which these tensions are negotiated. These include collaborative forms of writing, in which authors work to enable others to speak publicly, as well as autofictional and testimonial modes that foreground the conditions of their own enunciation. Such strategies can be understood as attempts to address the ethical (and epistemological) challenges inherent in depicting precaritised lives, even if they cannot fully resolve them.

This makes clear that literary representation is never neutral. It is bound up with questions of authority, authenticity, and power – whether in the mediation of migrant testimony, the self-reflexive positioning of narrators, or the staging of solidarity in politically engaged texts. The question of voice is therefore not simply a technical or formal issue, but a central dimension of how precarisation is made visible and intelligible.

At the same time, the analyses suggest that an exclusive focus on questions of representation risks obscuring literature's broader critical and political functions. While it is crucial to attend to who speaks and how, several contributions also emphasise literature's capacity to express political commitment, expose structural inequalities, render precarisation publicly recognisable, and help build solidarity. In this sense, the ethical problem of voice must be understood as part of a wider field in which portrayal, critique, and political intent intersect.

Taken together, these observations show that precarisation is not only unevenly distributed as a social condition, but also as a discursive capacity. The grammar of precarisation thus includes not only patterns of vulnerability and insecurity, but also the conditions under which these experiences can be articulated, recognised, and circulated.

Towards a conclusion

Bringing these strands together, *Precarisation Across Literatures* demonstrates that precarisation must be understood by attending to the multiple dimensions through which it is articulated. It is not a singular condition or a clearly bounded social category, but a constellation of processes that take shape differently across contexts, and that become intelligible through specific forms of description, narration, and interpretation. The concept's grammar, as it emerges from the juxtaposition of these analyses, encompasses patterns of socio-economic insecurity, but also the formal strategies, affective and intellectual registers, and discursive conditions through which such insecurity is perceived and made meaningful.

A central result of this investigation is that precarisation is unevenly distributed not only in material terms, but also in its cultural and representational dimensions. Differences in access to stable forms of work, welfare, and social recognition are mirrored by inequalities in voice, visibility, and interpretative authority. Literature plays a crucial role in mediating these disparities: it both registers the lived experience of precarisation and participates in shaping the ways in which it can be understood, communicated, and contested.

At the same time, *Precarisation Across Literatures* demonstrates that literature's relationship to precarisation cannot be reduced to a single function. As the preceding analyses have shown, literary texts may diagnose, document, contest, or reproduce precarious conditions, and often do so simultaneously. Rather than constituting a unified form of resistance, literature operates along a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from critical intervention to the articulation of constraint. In this regard, the contribution of literature lies less in providing solutions than in clarifying relations between individual experience and structural conditions, between local situations and global processes, and between vulnerability and agency.

Taken together, these observations reaffirm the value of approaching precarisation not through abstract definition, but through the comparative examination of concrete situations. By bringing diverse literary articulations into relation with one another, *Precarisation Across Literatures* contributes to highlighting the shifting criteria, distinctions, and patterns that govern how precarisation becomes intelligible. In doing so, it not only advances the conceptual understanding of precarisation, but also highlights the role of literature as a central site for reflecting on, and intervening in, the conditions that shape precarious lives.

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Precarisation has become a defining feature of contemporary life. How have writers responded to it? What can literature tell us about living under conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability?

Bringing together case studies from a variety of literary traditions, Precarisation Across Literatures examines how contemporary literature describes and interrogates the social realities of precarious existence. The contributors explore themes such as labour, class, mobility, belonging, and resistance, showing how literary texts both reflect and challenge the forces reshaping societies across the globe.

Offering new perspectives on one of the most pressing issues of our time, this volume demonstrates the importance of literary studies for understanding the human experiences behind economic and political change.

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