



Precarious Rhetorics

edited by Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston, Columbus.
The Ohio State University Press, 2018, 312 pp., \$89.95 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper);
\$19.95 (e-book).

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Hart has an unquenchable faith in liberal democracy, even as he delves into its darker aspects. In this book he takes Trump supporters both seriously and literally, presenting them at their own words, and attributing only those thoughts and feelings to them that can be substantiated through his voluminous data. Through them, he reveals the extent and nature of the damage that has been done to our politics. He argues that Trump is more symptom than cause of this damage, but also that it can be repaired only if we understand its causes and extent. This book makes a valuable contribution to that endeavor.

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The presence of new materialism has been felt for some time in rhetorical studies. Through theoretical considerations of topics as diverse as historiography, animals, microbrews, the QWERTY keyboard, and the Anthropocene, among others, scholars have drawn upon this tradition to better comprehend the complex relationships between affective intensities, materialities, ecologies, and human and non-human actors alike. In doing so, new materialist rhetoricians have worked to redirect the field's notion of rhetorical agency away from the individual, singularly discursive rhetor in favor of a more networked, circulatory approach to agency that decenters the human.

Continuing the application of new materialism to rhetorical theory, *Precarious Rhetorics* broadens connections between rhetoric and sites of structural, material inequality. In this first installment in the *New Directions in Rhetoric and Materiality* series from The Ohio State University Press, editors Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston argue that theories of precarity are necessary for rhetorical studies and communication studies scholars to understand how the material distribution of resources structures the lives, communities, and conditions of marginalized people around the world. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, the editors frame precarity as an analytic that can help parse how populations are differentially harmed and/or killed by social, political, and economic structures designed to debilitate them. The violence of precarity is both historical and racialized; it is produced by the state and perpetuated by its very infrastructures. This broad-based framing enables contributors to connect precarity to state-sanctioned murders of Black people; tides of xenophobia, fascism, and militarization; and transnational refugee crises as well as to the failures of liberal internationalism. And given how precarity organizes such issues of systemic injustices, the editors also position it as a lens through which scholars can see myriad structural connections—as well as the material, affective, and discursive flows of power—between a host of different actors and contexts. This outlook, according to Hesford, Licona, and Teston, can work to cultivate more relational understandings of materiality and rhetoric that, in turn, can generate new horizons for belonging, solidarity, and coalition.

Even as *Precarious Rhetorics* extends new materialist frameworks to a variety of global scopes and scales in rhetorical studies, the collection productively complicates these traditions. Picking up threads from Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric*, which worked to respark the field's interest in materiality, the editors ask "So, what now?" (5). Though anything but straightforward, possible answers can be found in the entanglements of the disciplines present in the book. Many chapters in *Precarious Rhetorics* invoke the work of critical race and ethnic studies, critical disability studies, Black feminist theory, and other traditions not typically present in new materialist scholarship. And as Hesford, Licona, and Teston make clear in their introduction, there's nothing new about materiality and relationality for Indigenous people or people of color whose experiences have been foundationally marked by racialized precarity for hundreds of years.

That said, many chapters in this volume still lean considerably on canonical materialist thinkers, with scholars such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett cropping up frequently. As such, more sustained engagement with the work of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx researchers working to critique new materialist epistemologies would have been welcome. For instance, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson—both of whom are referenced in the introduction—respectively draw attention to how people orient to "particular landscapes and landforms"¹ and exist in relation to "land forms, elements, plants, animals, spirits, sounds, thoughts, feelings, energies and all of the emergent systems, ecologies and networks."² In addition, Nina Maria Lozano proposes *border materialism*, which centers women's bodies and *femicidio* in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, as a means of interrogating the limits of new materialism.³ Given the contributions of these scholars as well as those of others, I would have liked to see a conclusion to the book that more directly addresses—and charts futurities for—the ties and tensions that exist between new materialism and Indigenous studies, Black feminisms, and queer theory. Nevertheless, the editors and contributors of this volume should be lauded for bringing together critical discussions of race, queer of color critique, and new materialism as a means of furthering this conversation in rhetorical studies.

Hesford, Licona, and Teston organize *Precarious Rhetorics* into three thematic sections. The first part takes stock of how precarity configures global dynamics of state violence, terror, and political resistance. In the second section, titled "Resignifications: Movement, Migration, and Displacement," contributors address the myriad ways in which racialized, transnational populations are invisibilized and made refugees, the ways in which they're harmed by precarity and work to resist it. The chapters here, in particular, and according to the editors, note how "dominant discourses and technologies of fear, suspicion, and social division" (11) play a critical role in these processes. The collection's third and final part identifies how precarity structures individuals' lives and practices in the context of institutions as varied as the neoliberal university, the U.S. labor force, and social media platforms.

Though the editors and contributors of *Precarious Rhetorics* do well to argue for how the manifold violences of settler colonialism, securitization, ableism, racism, labor, biopolitics, misogyny, and class warfare interanimate each other through logics of precarity, I discuss below the contributions of *Precarious Rhetorics*'s chapters through more distinct categories. However true it is that we cannot think of the structural oppressions that harm and displace multiply marginalized populations as separate, rhetoricians and other transdisciplinary scholars drawn to this book might approach the collection through the entry points of their own particular research interests. Thus, for the intents and purposes of this review, what follows is a recounting of the chapters in the book as represented through a different organizational schema structured around topics of race, narratives of marginalized and transnational populations, and material-embodied assemblages. That is not to say that chapters I discuss as being

primarily about race don't consider links between the material and embodied, or that chapters that revolve around bodies have nothing to say about the precarity of global movement. Nor am I saying that the editors should have organized *Precarious Rhetorics* in the fashion that I discuss them below. But I do believe that reconsidering the book through these overarching themes can highlight productive resonances between chapters in ways that highlight different areas of interest in rhetorical studies.

Chapters that focus on race address how individuals, nations, and populations negotiate systems of precarity manufactured by anti-Black, anti-Latinx, and xenophobic discourse. In his autoethnographic work, Louis M. Maraj describes the multiple precariousities he navigated as a Black immigrant/migrant graduate instructor at a predominantly white university. In drawing upon foundational Black scholars from Composition and Rhetoric, such as Adam J. Banks, Eric Darnell Pritchard, and Carmen Kynard, Maraj draws attention to relationality through Black feminist traditions that “prioritized [this concept] long before scholarship’s recent ‘new materialist turn’” (214). By contrast, Kimberlee Pérez’s contribution examines the uptake and circulation of Eric Garner’s final words, “I can’t breathe,” by a range of parties—some acting in coalition; some bending “I can’t breathe” toward state-sanctioned, pro-police sentiment; and still others appropriating these words in ways that erase anti-Black racism. Through Pérez’s case studies, students and researchers will find rich jumping-off points for discussions not only of racialized precarity but also pertaining to embodied rhetorics, social movement rhetorics, and coalitional possibilities. If Maraj and Pérez’s chapters are situated in institutional and community contexts, then contributions by Sara L. McKinnon and Adela C. Licona broaden conversations about precarity and race to international scales. McKinnon’s work identifies how the U.S. deploys necropolitical strategies to frame Mexico as a corrupt, violent, drug-infested region, thus devaluing the country and creating an impetus for imperial intervention. And in a complementary fashion, Licona’s chapter traces how the American imaginary is populated with criminalized images of immigrants/migrants and borders that reinforce racist, hegemonic violence.

By contrast, other contributions in this edited collection center case studies connecting precarity with narrative representations of vulnerable, global populations and people. In “Precarification in the Security State,” Alexandra S. Moore and Belinda Walzer parse how liberal subjects gain rights through self-narration by focusing on Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary*, written while the author was detained in Guantánamo. Slahi’s first-person testimonial, they argue, allows us to retool rhetorical notions of *ambience* and *kairos* while also working to help unearth analyses of how legal structures manufacture precarity. So too do Wendy S. Hesford and Amy Shuman employ narrative analysis in their chapter on global human rights. As they investigate how western media outlets position Yezidi women and girls—who have been raped, enslaved, and trafficked by members of ISIS—as precarious subjects, Hesford and Shuman invite readers to rethink the normative, rescuer-rescued binaries present in human rights discourse. Arabella Lyon’s work also contributes to these overarching themes through her critique of how local media represent Buffalo, New York’s refugee populations; she untangles discourses of precarity, employment, and neoliberalism in these contexts. In turn, Gale P. Coskan-Johnson troubles all-too simple ideas of “good” and “bad” asylum seekers by applying a feminist, anti-racist lens to circulating reports of—and responses to—mass sexual assault in Cologne, Germany on New Year’s Eve in 2015. As Coskan-Johnson reveals, activist attempts at enacting rhetorics of solidarity, as precarious as they might be, can reinforce racist and xenophobic tropes about refugees.

Finally, a handful of chapters shine a light on how material-embodied assemblages simultaneously create and resist precarity. Some of the contributors doing this work broach these conversations through the entry point of specific tools and technologies. In their rhetorical


history of U.S. labor power, Ronald Walter Greene and Kristin Swenson track the relational value of soft skills as contrasted with technical skills in the American workforce, gesturing toward how they matter and to whom as connected to categories of social difference: race, class, gender, and ability. Conversely, Becca Tarsa and James J. Brown Jr. explore how digital network interfaces, such as those of Facebook and Twitter, enable the harassment and abuse of precariously positioned populations on the internet. Working from an international scope, Lavinia Hirsu's chapter highlights the vital role of smartphones for asylum seekers in the Syrian refugee crisis. More foundationally, however, she challenges readers to consider the submerged, infrastructural relations between technologies, agency, and bodies as a starting point for analysis as opposed to the individual human agent. Other scholars working at the nexus of material-embodied assemblage take a more institutionally oriented tack to this subject matter. Margaret Price uses the lens of precarity to touch on the ways that unaccommodatable disabilities, such as chemical sensitivity, are emergent, situated, and exacerbated by the machinery of an academy that does little to recognize the labor of disabled faculty. Teston's chapter, in turn, takes aim at precision medicine's "fetishization of genetic differences" (278). She argues that increasing reliance on genetic evidence in health contexts fails to consider the complex social, cultural, and environmental relations in the communities of vulnerable populations, instead implementing a racialized system of biomedical control.

Although the theoretical contributions of *Precarious Rhetorics* are rich—both with regard to the place of precarity in materialist rhetorical studies as well as individual chapter contributions—it is occasionally difficult to know what *to do* with this collection. That editors and contributors identify precarity as a conceptual frame that cuts across disciplines is helpful. But the collection offers little by way of what scholar-activists can and should do to intervene in these interlocking systems of oppression. Tarsa and Brown's notion of "speculative redesign" is a generative methodology that offers rhetoricians a way forward in terms of visioning more just futures and publics (273) while Maraj's autoethnography models how academics might grapple with narrating their experiences and subjectivities as racially precaritized individuals. Yet other chapters, despite their attempt to suggest "concrete ways in which we can be part of a new materialist orientation toward the lives of others" (164), offer more theoretical and less pragmatic solutions. For instance, Hirsu's "Where Am I? Do You Have WiFi?" explicitly encourages readers to attend to non-human actors and assemblages in daily contexts as one such tactic. But even readers who adopt such a stance may find difficulty in mobilizing such a new materialist orientation to interrupt or otherwise overturn the structures of precarity that enact violence toward vulnerable populations. Of course, whether or not this collection is obligated to touch upon practical interventions is an open question; nothing in the introduction to *Precarious Rhetorics* suggests that the volume has been created as a pedagogical or action-oriented tool for scholar-activists. Yet these dimensions of the book might leave some academics wanting more guidance or direction in terms of how they might actually apply the chapters within it.

Regardless, as the contributors in this volume make clear, precarity functions as a useful analytic across a variety of sites and disciplines. That this concept can be located in spaces as wide-ranging as digital interfaces, the American neoliberal university, and international borders—and in fields as disparate as affect studies, medical humanities, and cultural geography—is a tremendous asset. Such a diversity of disciplinary perspectives, as present in this book, serves to illustrate the flexibility of precarity as a framework that can illuminate problems pertaining to migration, poverty, labor, colonialism, and other social forces and conditions. This array of topics also makes the collection imminently useful for scholars conducting research on any of these topics as well as teachable for those facilitating graduate-level courses in cultural studies, critical race and ethnic studies, rhetorical studies, and beyond.

Notes

1. Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 201.
2. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 15.
3. Nina Maria Lozano, *Not One More!: Femicidio on the Border* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019), 8.

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Culturally Speaking: The Rhetoric of Voice and Identity in a Mediated Culture, by Amanda Nell Edgar, Columbus, The Ohio State University Press, 2019, vii + 212 pp., \$29.95 (softcover).

"Vox nihil aliud quam ictus aër/The voice is nothing but beaten air."
 Seneca the Younger

What voice did you hear inside your head when you read that quote? Masculine or feminine? Young or old? Perhaps, black or white? Voices are imbricated with our social constructions of identity, and it is Amanda Nell Edgar's task in *Culturally Speaking: The Rhetoric of Voice and Identity in a Mediated Culture* to tease out the implications of these deeply rooted assumptions. For Edgar, the voice is not merely beaten air; rather, vocal sound is a socially shaped, material text. To study the role of voice in the U.S.-mediated culture, she develops a theoretical intervention in *critical cultural vocalics* and an inspired methodological use of the sound-editing software Audacity. The resulting analysis offers a nuanced insight into the processes by which certain voices are privileged and normalized in mainstream U.S. media, leaving others at the margins. This enterprise is ambitious, as Edgar tackles a variety of media ranging from popular music, to film, to television, to stand-up comedy. To study these areas of media, Edgar proposes the use of *critical cultural vocalics*, a theoretical orientation that illuminates how vocal intimacy and vocal identity generate socially shaped vocal texts. Her case studies most clearly offer insights to those engaged with critical sound studies, however feminist, critical race theory, and media studies scholars would all benefit from the illuminating work Edgar proffers in her four chapters of analysis.

As Edgar acknowledges in the introduction, the meaning she prescribes to the idea of "voice" in our mediated culture relies on the assertion that voices are complex interactions between bodies, social forces, and the media that circulate them. In short, the physical body, made of sinew, blood, sweat, and tears, leaves an irrevocable imprint on our cultural understandings of voice. To attend to this physicality, Edgar uses Audacity to analyze pitch, rate, silence, breath, vocal strain, and/or vocal control in her analysis of specific mediated voices. Linking these physical elements to vocal identity, "how the body presents itself through the voice" and vocal intimacy, "the connection forged between speaker and listener"