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Boxed In: Precarity and Affect in Coupland and Wallace

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Every day I am being washed over by a great wave, a wave called “precarity.” Our options for avoiding this wave are limited. We can flee inward and hope to stay dry or we can be washed out to sea. Is one more or less precarious than the other?

When Charles Manson met Squeaky Fromme on a beach in 1966, he recruited her by saying, “The way out of a room is not through the door. Just don't want out, and you're free.” This quote feels especially apropos today under the harsh glare of an audience, the pressure to fit everything important into twelve minutes, and the natural desire to come off as generally coherent; this particular perch feels somewhat precarious. Manson's bit of rhetorical nonsense offers something of a way out, the suggestion that the real confinement is not the room itself but the desire to escape. It's a self-serving statement, but it also reveals one of his influences. Manson was a reader of management guru Dale Carnegie, and his “just don't want out” line reads like a twisted hippie inversion of Carnegie's “throw yourself into work” ethos. But is this really an answer? In today's labor conditions, “out” is the perpetual, “normal” state; there is no real, permanent “in”, so while Manson and Carnegie suggest that we might be able to recover from this precarious state, is simply embracing it, “not wanting out,” really a viable solution?

Carnegie's project offers a way to navigate office bureaucracy, the tools to subtly manipulate your way to the top, but that project assumes the security of long-term employment, that there is a bureaucracy to manipulate, that anything will be left to rise up to. The labor demands of the 1970s - more intellectually stimulating, less monotonous work - were met with a response from Capital that, according to French sociologist Luc Boltanski in his book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, shifted the focus of labor away from so-called “jobs for life” to more casual, temporary, flexible labor. This shift was a way for capital to reassert control. Carnegie would have us believe that the end of all this friend-winning manipulation - corporate success - offers a kind of professional security, a freedom in permanence, but it also suggests a kind of corporate cultishness, the promise of a world that doesn't actually exist, the idea of security in a world that is gripped by precarity, where the pressure to get ahead is undermined by the pressure to simply hang on.

To have a hope of riding the wave of precarity, we must first be able to define it. It was with an interest in this buzzword of political and social theory, a condition that seems both indeterminate and inescapable, that I began this project. I looked at a slate of novels from the last twenty-five years, and I also took a look at what some sociologists have to say. In their article “From Precarity to Precariousness and Back Again”, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter define precarity as a state of perpetual uncertainty, quoting Milanese activist Alex Foti in further defining it as “being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time [are] determined by external forces.” This seems the most straightforward, all-encompassing definition. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* Boltanski and Eve Chiappello explore the shift in focus from the job to the project, from long-term employment to the demands of “employability.” Melissa Gregg, in her book, *Work's Intimacy*, explores the personal nature of this knowledge

work alongside the rise of telecommuting and advances in mobile technology and social networking, from work as something we do to something we live. These writers all emphasize the affective effects - the psychic costs - of this increasingly flexible workforce. But how do we make sense of this? How can we look at this in action?

If you're like me, you turn to literature, itself a form of "knowledge work". I am particularly interested in the office setting, that boring old beige-and-fluorescent box that has become the site of so much affective labor, so I chose some recent fiction where this office setting figures prominently, ultimately choosing two novels less for their literary merits than for how they use this setting and because they offer different accounts of precarity. Douglas Coupland's zeitgeist-y 1995 novel *Microserfs* follows a group of young computer programmers as they de-camp from the cocoon of Microsoft's Redmond, Washington campus and its present but invisible leader, Bill, for the wild tech frontier of Silicon Valley, trading the perceived prestige of a job at Microsoft's main campus for a table in the living room at Mom's house. In David Foster Wallace's posthumous 2011 novel *The Pale King*, the classic image of professional stability - the government civil service job - becomes the primary producer of psychic anomie, and the brutal stability of this monotonous work becomes yet another version of precarity.

Microserfs is dominated by the lack of certainty that characterizes the condition of precarity. Microsoft is presented as paternal, a company where everyone wants Bill's approval: "Bill, be my friend ... please!" Bill is not only Microsoft's corporate leader, but its affective leader as well. "If Bill drove a Shriner's go-cart to work," the narrator concludes, "everybody else would, too." Bill offers not only a clean, potentially well-paid place to work, but a way to be in the world. Everyone at Microsoft, with its offer of compensation through vested stock, is a potential Bill. But this Redmond womb, which might seem secure on the surface, operates on a condition of precarity in both thought and practice. The promise of vested stock offers not security but another form of precarity, subject, as Neilson and Rossiter remind us, to crisis, risk, and uncertainty. The up and down of Microsoft stock is, to the narrator, who monitors it constantly, "a real psychic yo-yo," a constant reminder that, while it is possible to make money, it is also possible to lose it just as quickly. This yo-yoing underlies a greater insecurity: the knowledge that Microsoft is not a job for life. The narrator knows that the time it takes for stock to vest - four-and-a-half years - is potentially longer than the lifespan of one of Bill's employees, all of whom have an estimated time of departure from Microsoft of "within five years." Capital itself is plagued by insecurity, and the possibility of attaining any is itself overshadowed by the possibility that, even if you get any stock, you won't be around long enough for it to mean anything, or, if you are, the stock may always lose value.

The promise of vestment, the proximity to Bill: these things are the shiny stick that allows them to imagine the carrot. These are the things that hail them. The characters only ever exist as subjects. They are constantly being interpellated, but, in a portrayal that anticipates the condition later described by Melissa Gregg, where social networks turn mere contacts into friends, the interpellation in *Microserfs* operates on an intimate level. The novel opens with this. One of the characters, Michael, described as "the most sensitive programmer in Building Seven," receives an email directly from Bill. Here, Althusser's generic "Hey, you there" is replaced with a more familiar, "Hey, Michael." This does not require a turn of the head to imply subjection; it assumes it, and the interpellation is so complete that the other characters only wish it would

happen to them. Bill's email, even when it is a flaming critique of Michael's work, is "tinged with glamour," and the other workers are jealous that this blistering email was not directed at them. Their subjection is complete, leaving them with the desire for the certainty, faint as it may be, that comes with recognition. Like Flask's honor at being kicked by such a man as Ahab, they all want to be flamed by Bill. But even as friends are not above criticism, writing itself is always a bit precarious. Gregg charts the growth of telecommuting alongside the rise of social media, particularly MySpace and Facebook, two platforms she mentions side by side, which suggests that we live in such an accelerated age that nearly every utterance is outdated the moment it is made.

If *Microserfs* presents an image of uncertainty, we might be tempted to believe that the opposite of this - certainty, some kind of guarantee - would be the opposite of precarity, but Neilson and Rossiter remind us that regular work is just another version of precarity, "consuming time, energy, and affective relations as well as producing the anxiety that results from the 'financialisation of daily life' (2). Lane Dean Jr, Wallace's precarious IRS accountant, has perhaps the most secure job, an apparently stable home, and he knows what to expect, day in, day out. He is also the character operating under the greatest duress. He experiences the opposite of intimacy, existing in a state of near total isolation. The security of his job is the point from which the anxiety originates, and part of Lane Dean's anxiety, as we follow the rapid deterioration of mental state, is that he wants out of the room. His IRS training has oriented him to "think out," to just imagine that he is somewhere else when he gets bored. Lane Dean spends much of his energy following this procedure even when he knows it does not work. This focus on *out* only reminds him of how *in* he really is. Unlike the programmers in *Microserfs*, Lane Dean has no intimate work relationships. He is alienated from the anonymous "they" that runs the office and from the work that he cannot ever do fast enough.

What do we do about this? These literary representations do not offer any sense that the state of precarity can be undermined. The "solution" seems to be that precarity can never really be overcome, only endured. Work never ends; it only becomes more ingrained. *Microserfs* ends without any sense that their situation has improved beyond a vague notion that things are "going fine," an assessment that is itself indeterminate. Precarity is not undermined here; the intimacy is only further deepened.

The precarity never ends for Lane Dean either. After processing countless tax returns and falling asleep at his desk, he ends up back where he started: with work to do and time not passing. He cannot undermine his own precariousness because he cannot even settle on what to call it.

But while time never passes for Lane Dean, it has passed for me. Thank you.

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