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Anne Fuchs. Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture. Cornell UP and Cornell University Library, 2019.

Andrea D. Bryant
Georgetown University, andrea.dawn.bryant@gmail.com

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Abstract

Review of Anne Fuchs. *Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture*. Cornell University Press and Cornell University Library, 2019. 322 pp.

Keywords

Eigenzeit; resonance; precariousness; contingency; anthropocene

Anne Fuchs. *Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture*. Cornell UP and Cornell University Library, 2019. 322 pp.

This present historical moment, which simultaneously halts and hurries, likewise summons meditations on the nuanced nature of contingency and precarity. In the recently published *Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture*, Anne Fuchs contemplates the nature of contingency and precarity by synthesizing a range of texts from modernism to the present day. *Precarious Times* presents a corpus of canonical and contemporary works comprising an assortment of media in the visual, verbal, and acoustic modes.

Reading *Precarious Times* is akin to granting oneself *Eigenzeit*, an apprehensive time for the self. Building on Helga Nowotny's conceptualization, Fuchs references *Eigenzeit* as operating between the competing configurations of the public sphere and the private realm of the self. Fuchs vividly illustrates the nature of this contingent (in)stability through myriad discussions of how *Eigenzeit* fulfills the demands of the public world while replenishing the need for private retreat. As she demonstrates, the foreboding that comes from *Eigenzeit*, or "I-time" (16), is at once convalescent and frightful; it underscores the contingent precarity of an increasingly connected world configured by the need for greater speed and instant access across a complex network fused with the now. Bringing the reader full circle, Fuchs confirms that the very act of reading converts mental perturbation into levant suspension.

Fuchs articulates the deeply refined modulations of what it means to pursue, embrace, enjoy, and suffer from and through *Eigenzeit*. Although at first blush the transient suspension accomplished through *Eigenzeit* underscores complete freedom from external mandates, Fuchs traces the contours of the peripheries of "I-time" to demonstrate its more profound nature. On the one hand, *Eigenzeit* becomes a third niched space in which individuals may autonomously choose to be out of sync with the demands of their respective environments. On the other, it is carved against deeper anxieties about what it means to exist in an increasingly connected, fast-paced universe. Fuchs shows how the inherent nature of *Eigenzeit* loosens (yet does not fully cut) the connection between free will and enforced experience. As a result, *Eigenzeit* oscillates both in tandem and in tension with freedom, residing in a precariously contingent relationship.

The first tenuous juncture between overarching requisites and the individuals constrained in them is considered in the context of modernism and speed politics. Fuchs presents variegated responses to German cultural discourses as they appear in *fin de siècle* considerations of modern subjectivity's disequilibrium, a task deftly accomplished and bookended by Friedrich Nietzsche's deliberate departure from time in his essay *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* and Sigmund Freud's considerations. Extending beyond the theoretical are aesthetically rendered experiences of both willful and involuntary

distractions like K.'s oblivion to time in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Robert Walser's feuilleton montages, and the "geography of latency" (109) central to narratives by Robert Musil and Thomas Mann. The illuminating discussion of these carefully selected texts peels back the many layers of modernity's tenuous relationship to time and technology.

More closely investigating the role of technological and aesthetic affordances, Fuchs subsequently sketches several artistic choices meant to counteract an increasingly fast-paced world. She discusses slow art's enactment of "slowness as an aesthetic practice and a mode of reception" (119) in the context of Michael Wesely's uncanny creations of atemporality, Ulrich Wüst's chronologically displaced photo series, Ulrich Seidl's diegetic choices, and Maren Ade's candidly bizarre portrayals of corporate culture. The artistic choices of each enhance and deepen the fullness with which individuals juxtapose against their own respective contingencies. Notably, technical choices both accomplish and relay this disjointedness. Wesely's own invention of camera equipment, for example, allows for longer exposure time that in turn illustrates the transience of technological progress as exposed through the stability of nature in cityscapes. Seidl's decision to incorporate integral sounds while filming, rather than overlaying acoustics after the fact, is similarly embedded in discordant notions of environment and temporality.

Attuned to contemporary literary landscapes, *Precarious Times* also presents precariousness as narrated in the German literary scene. Here, works ranging from Clemens Meyer's *Als wir träumten* (*As We Were Dreaming*) and Karen Duve's *Taxi* to Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (*Go, Went, Gone*) are discussed. As noted, Meyer's focus on the thrilled (and thrilling) moment of the fleeting present differs from Duve's portrayal of vacuous time in transit. For both Meyer and Duve, *Eigenzeit* undergoes further temporal crisis when there is neither past connection nor known future terminus. Mixing the genres of documentary and novel, Erpenbeck heightens emergent awareness of similar cataclysms in her semi-documentary novel, which focuses on the "crisis of inequality" (280) inherent to the compulsory submersion of millions of lives into perpetual displacement. Left unmoored, self-time for the protagonists becomes adrift.

The blurred nature of contingency, precariousness, and *Eigenzeit* is further addressed through the fact that future human existence depends on the binary prevention of collapse. In the epilogue, the possibilities and necessities of alternative onto-epistemological constructions are considered. In using Juli Zeh's novel *Leere Herzen* (*Empty Hearts*) as an artifact, Fuchs sets up a figurative backdrop for discussing dystopias in real, albeit future, time. In this regard, planetary ethical consciousness as well as alternative modes of existence must be created to prevent such a disaster. Articulated as the tipping point of no return (285),

this demonstrates that future human existence hinges on the fine line between precarity and contingency.

Concluding with a call to combine aesthetic and scholastic horizons with ethical modes of existence, *Precarious Times* urges one to embark on the quest for broader planetary consciousness. This is accomplished through an intricate discussion of *Eigenzeit* as it manifests geopolitically, aesthetically, and in daily life. Masterfully achieved, this work instills in the reader the contingent precarity of existing in the present. Reading it, one is transported to a time before the global pandemic when the issue emanated more of a theoretical than literal nature. Located on the other side of the tipping point, scholars from cultural, media, and literary studies, along with their general reader counterparts, encounter the uncanniness and become *flâneurs* of the past.

Andrea Dawn Bryant
Georgetown University