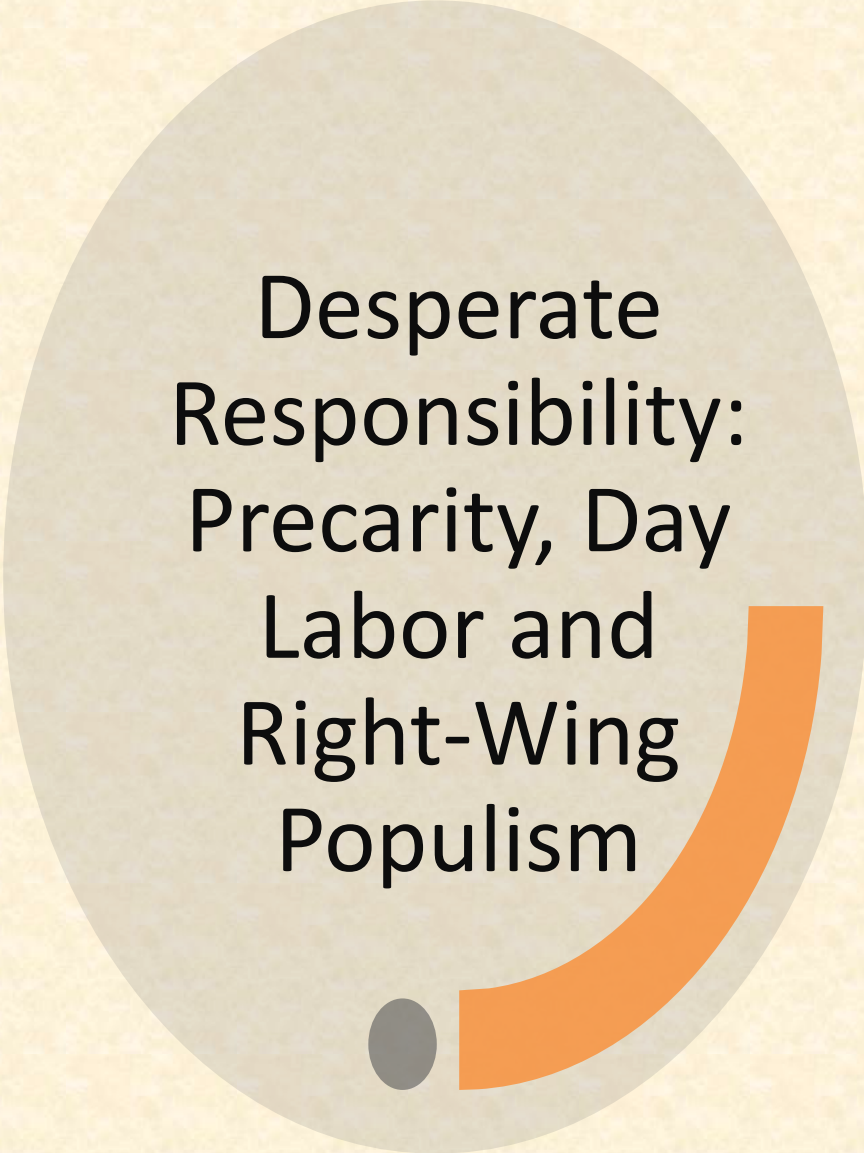


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10 November 2020



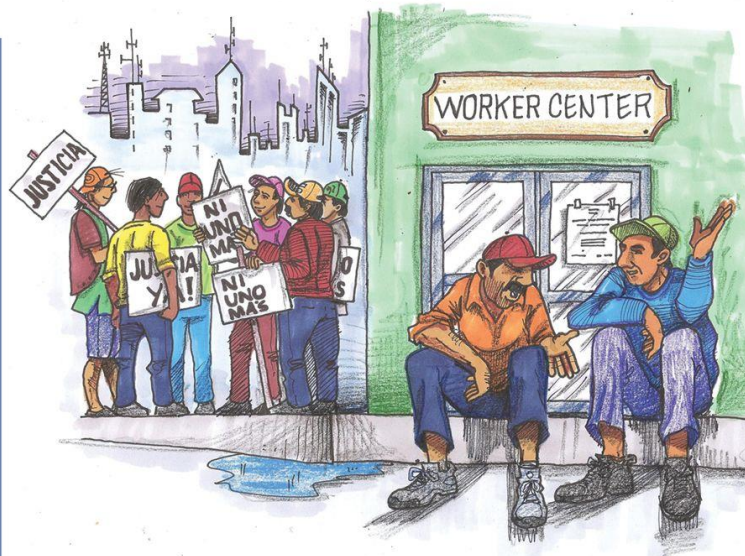
Desperate Responsibility: Precarity, Day Labor and Right-Wing Populism

PAUL APOSTOLIDIS

THE FIGHT FOR TIME

Migrant Day Laborers
and the Politics
of Precarity

STUDIES IN SUBALTERN LATINA/O POLITICS



**Oxford
University
Press 2019**

Key arguments

Precarity has a bivalent social dynamic

- Marks certain populations as exceptionally precaritised
- Spreads throughout the working world

Precarious experience is defined by contradictory patterns of time in everyday work-life

- Time-flows and the future are utterly unpredictable...and all too predictable
- Personal responsibility deepens the contradiction

Precarity inhibits the temporal consciousness needed for democratic citizenship

- ...and enables right-wing reinstalment of racial hierarchies
- ...and facilitates Trumpist affect-politics



Popular Education: “To make oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed.”
(Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*)

Generative Themes: The language of political struggle (concrete, poetic, emotional, visual)

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BORRADO SECO

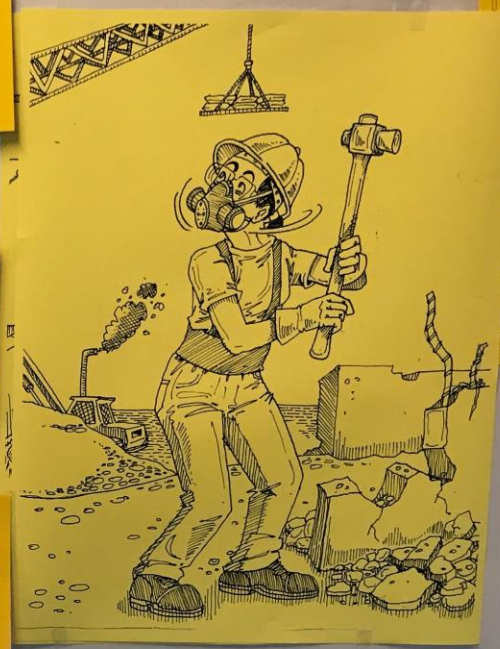
EL PATRON

EL TRABAJO

EL/LA TRABAJADOR/A

Ramiro Rodriguez - 133
 Pedro Us - 727
 Alfonso Garcia - 014
 Santos Rodriguez - 358
 Ovidio Ramirez - 089
 Ricardo Lara - 892
 Ignacio Cruz - 137
 Eugenio Luna - 7737

Y362LM62
 Y16W2
 Y3U2G
 Y1DU2
 Y30W2
 Y1G
 Y261W2



12-14-15

Roberto Rivera	06
Harrison Allen	8
Bento Ayala G.	47
Angel Rodriguez	2
Alfonso Aleman	06
Miguel Ramos	64
Alejandro Morales	97
Jorge Zepeda	58
Francisco Marquez	32
Pedro Espinoza	11
Samuel Hernandez	00
José J. Macias	65
Pablo Delgado	42
Antonio Hernandez	23
José Arguiano	61
Domingo Sales	42
Camila Casanova	12
Juan Vls	82
Francisco Cantu	06
José Lara	31
Marcel Gutierrez	42
Juan M. Diaz	09
Rosendo Hernandez	07
Francisco Lomas	32
Leonardo Gomez	03
Gilberto Gonzalez	91
Javier Villalaz	41
Agustin Jimenez	01
William Bassier	01
Alex Ventura	01
Rodolfo Mejia	01
Clayton Sanchez	5

YOUR STORE TO YOUR
FREE

THEME

“Critical-Popular” Analysis:

Listen for resonances
between workers’
generative themes and
critical social theory about
precarity

THEORY



Identify potential for reciprocal learning
and political alliances among widely
ranging groups

Day laborers in the US

- 75% are unauthorized migrants
- Nearly 90% are from Latin America (esp. Mexico, Central America)
- 95% are men (but women who are domestic workers increasingly go to day labor centers)

(Valenzuela, Theodore, Meléndez & Gonzalez 2006)

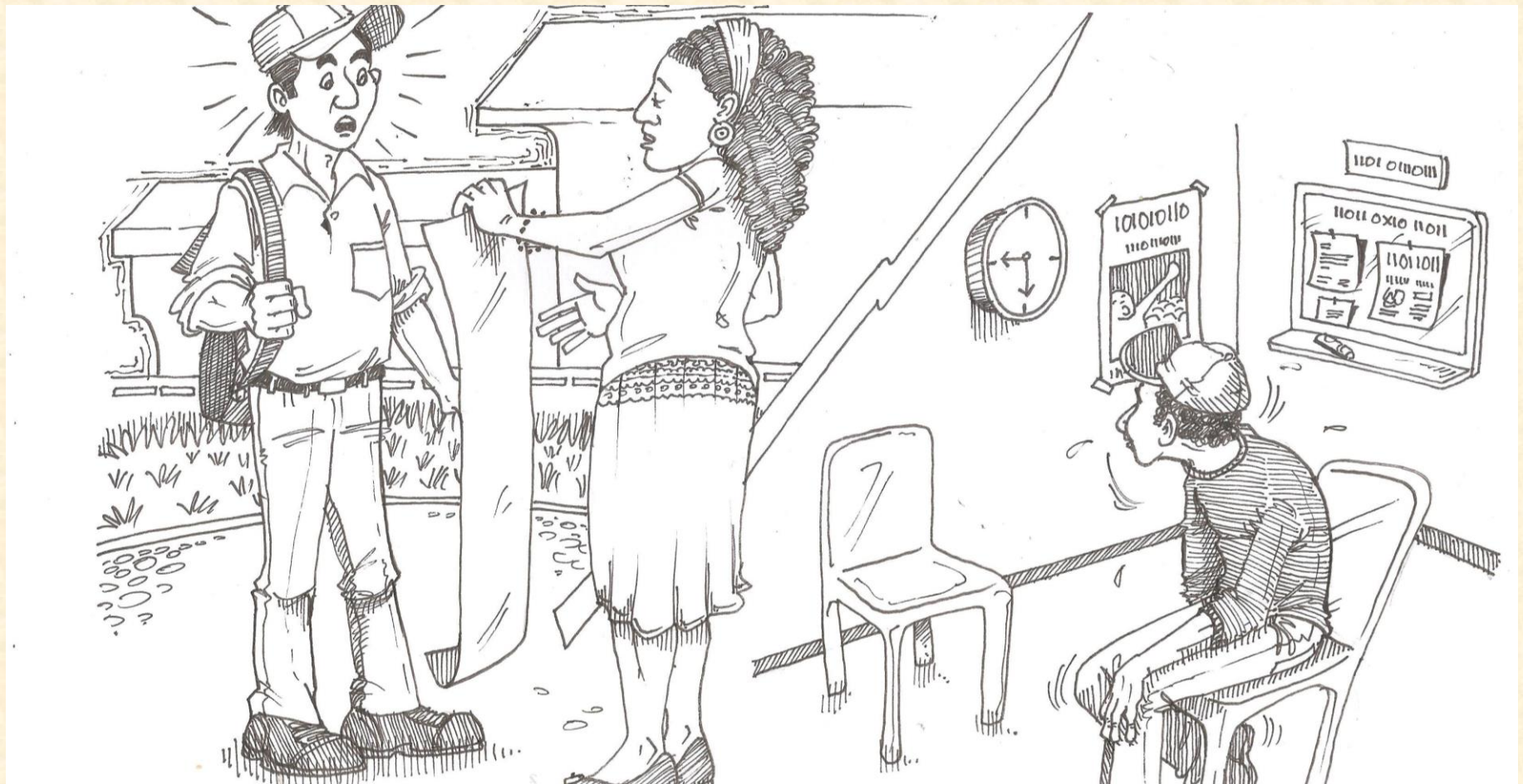




- **Casa Latina (Seattle)**
 - 27 interviews; 170 hours participant observation (job dispatch volunteering)
- **VOZ Workers' Rights Education Project, MLK Day Labor Center (Portland)**
 - 51 interviews; 110 hours participant observation (volunteer English teaching)

Interview topics

- Workers' general life circumstances and what had brought them to Casa Latina or MLK Ctr.
- Experiences “on the corner”
- Health and safety issues
- Workers' conceptions of “community” and “membership” at the worker centres



Generative theme (1)
desperate responsibility

Waiting for the
lottery, Casa
Latina, 6:30 a.m.

'It's that sometimes people
get desperate because they
aren't working. Because
sometimes there's work, and
sometimes there's not.'

'How can I put it – it's the
worries. I think that if I had a
job where I worked until the
evening, I'd get organized
enough to study.... My mind
doesn't rest. I'm worried,
thinking about it, so my head
doesn't let me rest.'

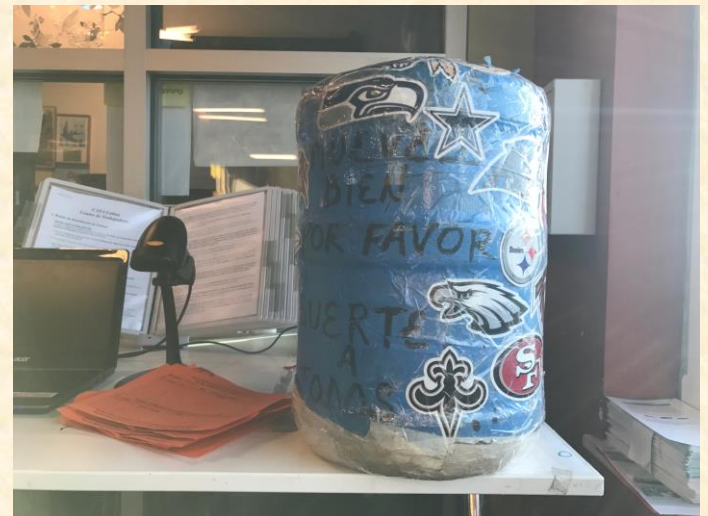
Precarious time's contradictions

DISCONTINUITY

- Changing jobs
- Changing employers
- Changing paces of work
- Changing frequency of work
- Changing wage rates
(exacerbated by wage theft)

CONTINUITY

- Relentless anxiety
- Grinding poverty
- Perpetual readiness to work
whenever possible



'Just work. Working wherever it may be – it doesn't matter where. If you don't work, there's no money, there's no food, there's no house, there's no nothing if you don't work.' (day laborer, MLK Center)



‘good workers’

- Fast
- Efficient
- Use work-time today to get more work tomorrow
- ‘echarle ganas’:
SHOW the boss how hard you work

‘bad workers’

- ‘I’ve gone to work with people who just want to sit there talking. If [the employers] tell you it’s a six-hour job, they want to do it in twelve.’

Generative theme (2)

*risk on all
sides –
eyes wide
open*



risk on all sides: desperate body-time

CONTINUITY

- Constant vigilance
- Perpetual bracing for injury
- Nonstop anxiety

DISCONTINUITY

- Shifting physical hazards
- Shifting employer attitudes
- Shifting jobs & equipment



eyes wide open: embodied responsibility

- Protect your own physical safety
- Good/bad worker dichotomy
- Rarely possible to practise consistently

‘I’m going to tell you something: ‘Keep your eyes wide open’ is one of the most important things you have to do. Many times, [it’s] laziness – when you go to work, laziness is one of the things that causes you a lot of accidents.... You have to focus on what you’re doing. Have your eyes open.’ (day laborer, Casa Latina)

Migrant day laborers and exceptional precarity





Day labor as
synecdoche
for precarity
writ large



Incessant Work

The post-industrial work ethic:

“Employers want...not just the labor of the hand, but the labors of the head and the heart.”

Professionalism

“...an erosion of the temporal boundaries between work and life, and a different calibration of the qualities of emotional investment between the times and spaces of work and life outside it.”

K. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 2011

Interruptive Work

Smart phones and work-readiness

“At every moment and place [workers] are reachable and can be called back to perform a productive function that will be reinserted into the global cycle of production.”

F. Berardi, *The Soul at Work*,
2008

Increasing work-environmental OSH risks



"Our apologies. 11



Desperate responsibility as general phenomenon

- Responsibilisation of the neoliberal subject (W. Brown; A. Azmanova; M. Feher)
- Workplace 'fissuring' and the corporate 'wellness' culture (D. Weil)



Political implications of precarity as desperate responsibility

- Despondent leap from work's temporal vexations into a fantasy of socioeconomic advancement through personal responsibility
- Loss of freedom as ability to imagine other forms & temporalities of life-activity...
- ...and as critical capacity to reflect on possible past-present-future relations

‘Political literacy’ and democratic citizenship

- Assess present suffering & dysfunction as ‘defeats’ in historically rooted struggles that can be re-engaged differently...
- ...not as ‘losses’ that require mourning and ‘moving on’

(A. Vásquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility*, 2016)

→ ***Desperate responsibility thwarts such ‘political responsibility’***

→ ***Inhibits the ‘hopeful stillness’ that political literacy requires***

‘Migrantizing the Citizen’

- ‘Migrant/citizen’ dualism: migrant as needy transgressor and potential threat to national citizen
 - Obscures intra-state mobility and common subjection to general socioeconomic forces
- ‘Migrantizing the citizen excavates the connections between exclusions within citizenship and exclusions from citizenship.’ (B. Anderson 2015)
- Makes the effort ‘to recognise differences between nationals and non-nationals at the same time as demonstrating structural and historical links between the experiences and relations of both.’ (B. Anderson 2015)

→ *Desperate responsibility impedes efforts to make such links rather than reassert conventional hierarchies*

Right-wing populist 'racial transposition'

- Applying anti-Black 'producer vs. parasite' tropes to poor & working-class whites
- 'Unlike the leaders of past populist revolts, Trump seemed less a champion of the working people than a figure who confirmed their debased status, revelling in such terms as "disgust," "weakness," "losing," and "pathetic.'" (HoSang & Lowndes 2019)

‘Multiculturalist right-wing populism’

Reasserting whiteness as the pinnacle of citizenship in a diverse America

Reassuring the ‘losers’



Explaining cross-class and trans-racial Trumpism (1)

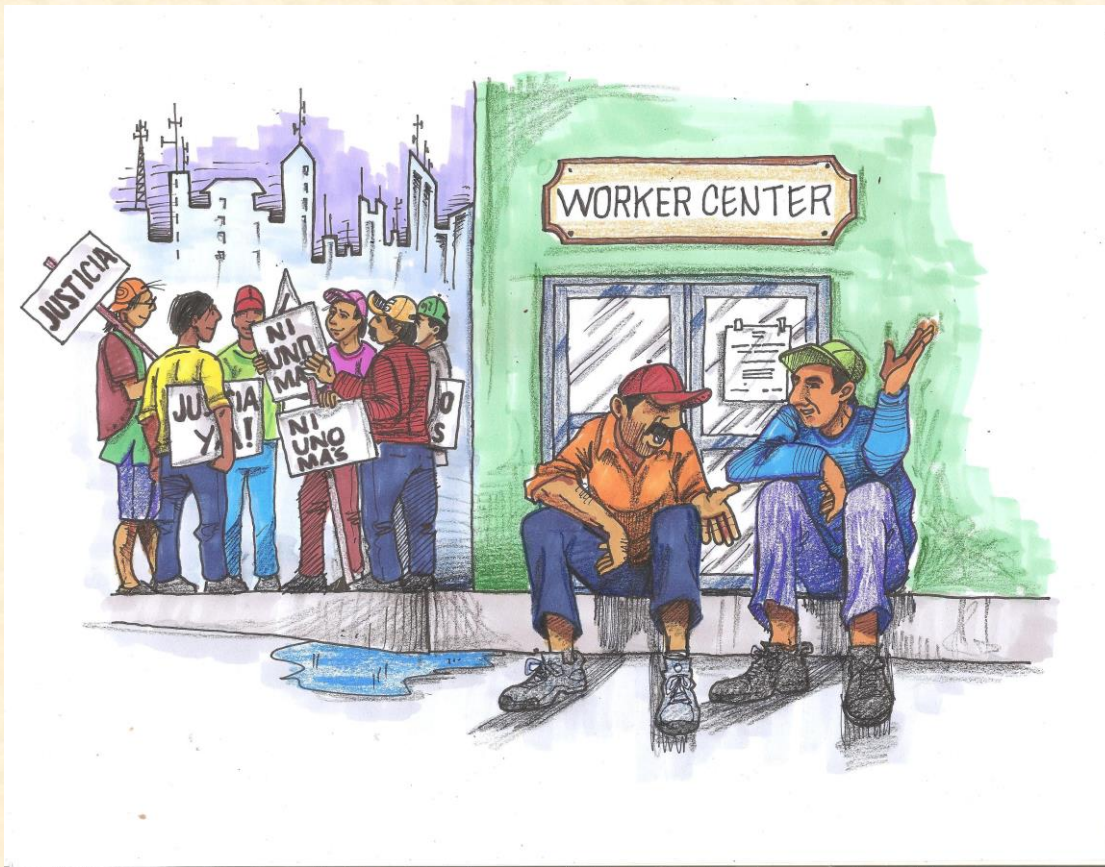
- Recognise that precarity spreads throughout society
- Conceptualise precarity as subject-constituting everyday experience, not just an economic trend grasped through aggregate measures
- Understand how precarity discourages the political literacy needed to migrantise the citizen (rather than demonising the migrant and other figures of racial threat)

Trumpian affect politics

- ‘Hyper-intensification of shock politics’
 - ‘disjointed, unpredictable tempos of Twitter-like communications and unvetted executive actions...’
 - ...which happen ‘incessantly’
 - Ongoing crisis ‘distracts, disorients, and disorganizes the polity in ways that work to overload the circuits of critical response’
- ‘Nominalist sovereignty’
 - ‘employs a sheer chaos of unpredictable and unaccountable disruptions and contradictions’
 - ‘admits of no otherness to which it is accountable, not even [the leader] himself an eye blink prior to the present’
- ‘Ubiquitous and unanswerable’ violence
 - ‘Just as Trump-shocks come anytime and all the time – these expressions of resonant violence can emerge explosively from anywhere and everywhere’ (Haro & Coles 2017)

Desperate responsibility and Trumpist worker-citizen affect

- Precarious work-life acclimatises workers to the temporalities of Trumpist citizenship
- Right-wing populism transposes the temporal affects of precarious work into embodied experiences of citizenship
- Precarious work-life accustoms worker-citizens to accepting impossible burdens of personal responsibility
 - and blocks political responsibility
 - Denies the ‘hopeful stillness’ needed for ‘political literacy’
 - Denies the time for reflection needed to ‘migrantize the citizen’



An alternative politics of precarity

- Incubate temporally experimental conjunctions of work and citizenship
- Critically engage precarity both as an exceptionalising force and as an encompassing social dynamic