

HL3045: The Poetry of Precarity
Semester 1, AY2024-25
NB: This syllabus is subject to change.

Instructor: Asst Prof. Li Qi Peh
Office hours: By appointment
Time and Venue: TBA

Course Description

The 21st century as we know it is an age defined by precarity. This is a time of economic, environmental, and political insecurity, a time when the world seems to be in a permanent state of crisis. But the overwhelming sense of uncertainty that we're feeling now is not entirely unique. Poets writing in different time periods have always sought to come to terms with the material and emotional effects of unstable working and living conditions in a globalized world in different ways.

This course will introduce you to the different aesthetic models and figurative tools poets from the 17th to the 21st centuries used to come to terms with precarity. You will examine poetry from a variety of genres (pastorals, georgics, elegies, sonnets, free-verse) alongside work in other fields, including anthropology, environmental studies, and sociology. In attending to how precarity is expressed, produced, experienced, and resisted, you will recognize how race, gender, and class shape experiences of precarity, understand the social structures that enable precarity from a variety of cultural perspectives, and experiment with understanding contemporary experiences of precarity from a historical point-of-view. Along the way, you will also be exposed to the many ways of interpreting poetry.

Course Readings (to be purchased)

*All other readings in the schedule can be found online.

Susan Howe, *Debths*, (New Directions, 2017)

Assignments and Deadlines

Article Review – 15% (1000 words)

Analyze and critique one scholarly source of your choice from the source bank. What does the author argue, and how do they advance this argument? What are the strengths and limitations of their argument? What aspects of precarity do they account for, and what do they leave out?

Deadline: 7th September (Saturday), 11:59pm

Mid-term essay - 20% (1500 words)

Make an argument about any two primary texts we've read in the course thus far, paying special attention to their rhetorical and stylistic features.

Deadline: 12th October (Saturday), 11:59pm

Seminar presentation - 15%

Give a 10-minute presentation applying a scholarly text to a modern-day example of precarity, pointing out some parallels between this example and one of the primary texts we've read.

Deadline: Rolling

Final research paper - 40% (3000 words)

Make an argument about any two primary texts we've read in the second half of term, engaging with at least 3 scholarly sources. Select sources you have not yet written about.

Deadline: 29th November (Friday), 11:59pm

Participation - 10%:

Students are expected to participate in class discussions and any activities conducted within the classroom.

Course Schedule

Week	Topic	Readings/ Activities
Week 1	Introduction: Definitions of Precarity	No Reading
Week 2	Disturbed Beginnings	Selections from Books 1 to 3 of John Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> (1667)
Week 3	Disorder	Book 9 of John Milton's <i>Paradise Lost</i> (1667)
Week 4	Uncertain Futures	Selections from Edward Young's <i>Night Thoughts</i> (1742-45)
Week 5	Ecologies of Risk	James Grainger's <i>The Sugar Cane</i> (1764)
Week 6	Precarious Life	Samson Occam's <i>A Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul</i> (1772) and selections from Phillis Wheatley's <i>Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral</i> (1773)
Week 7	Histories of Precarity	Extracts from Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's <i>The Age of Phillis</i> (2020)

RECESS WEEK		
Week 8	Contingent Communities	A selection of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)
Week 9	Women in the Marketplace	Thomas Hood, "The Song of the Shirt" (1843) and Christina Rossetti, <i>Goblin Market</i> (1862)
Week 10	Disabled Bodies	Martin Farquhar Tupper, "The Stammerer's Complaint" (1838), Selections from William Wordsworth's <i>The Prelude</i> (1850), and Amy Levy's <i>A Minor Poet</i> (1884)
Week 11	Forced Migrations	W.H. Auden, <i>Refugee Blues</i> (1939)
Week 12	The Art of Salvaging	A.R. Ammons, <i>Garbage: A Poem</i> (1993)
Week 13	Life in Patchwork	Selections from Susan Howe, <i>Debths</i> (2017)