In William Gibson’s “Bridge” novels, the politics for resisting neoliberal dystopia originate in the slum. Published from 1993 to 1999, the series depicts the US of the near future beset by post-industrial urban decline, natural catastrophes, and governmental collapse. The thread that links these narratives, which otherwise swiftly jump between characters and locales, is the site of the “Bridge,” a shantytown metropolis on the site of the former San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. This dramatic setting first appeared in “Skinner’s Room,” a short story that explains how this shantytown came about years after the original Bay Bridge fell into disuse. The combination of rising rents and a cataclysmic earthquake pushed the city’s most vulnerable to the breaking point: “One night the people came” and simply took the Bridge as their own. “No plan, no signal. Just came” (“Skinner’s Room” 64). The efficacy of the Bridge at demarcating this precarious future is elaborated over three subsequent novels. The first book in the series, Virtual Light, describes the Bridge’s as “an accretion of dreams”: from “tattoo parlors, gaming arcades” to “sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars” (Virtual 70). The Bridge’s shanty scene is set against the urban expanse of San Francisco, where transnational corporations are in the process of rebuilding the city with advanced technology to create “self-sufficient” skyscrapers (Virtual 275). Deeply invested in the problems associated with severe wealth inequality and uneven technological development, the narrative poses a stark contrast between the topoi of social life.\(^1\) On one side is the Bridge’s fringe society, which operates on the basis of naked exposure to vulnerability; on the other, a space that offers a semblance of security by walling off its residents from the rest of society entirely.

While Gibson wrote the Bridge novels in view of the social problems of the day, his attention to vulnerable life in the context of the post-industrial US deserves renewed attention. The Bridge setting adeptly takes the problem of wealth inequality and poverty, both problems
familiar to any city, and amplifies them to a point beyond immediate recognition. But, as this essay argues, Gibson’s figuration of this shanty space does more than call attention to the problem of homelessness; rather, it makes the case for thinking of vulnerable life itself, which is the essential characteristic of the Bridge shantytown, as the basis for resisting neoliberal dystopia. In emphasizing the subtext to the Bridge space, this paper has much in common with recent scholarship on infrastructure in genre fiction, which explores the connotative power of the various highways, bridges, and dams that dot the landscape in dystopian or apocalyptic narratives. In view of these evocative settings, Michael Rubenstein, Bruce Robbins, and Sophia Beal identify speculative fiction’s power to delineate social and political forms that might otherwise escape scrutiny. In their introductory essay on “Infrastructuralism,” they explain that “[w]e may not all know what infrastructure is when we see it, but we do all know what infrastructure is when we see it blow up on screen” (576). These accounts add to the sense that speculative narratives—owing to, rather than in spite of, their fantastic displays of explosive conflicts and hyperbolic dystopias—provide insight into what was when they speculate on what will be. Moreover, they make a strong case for attending to setting and place as ways of appreciating a given text’s engagement with trenchant political or social practices. To set a narrative on a ruined highway or shuttered bridge invites questions about what specific actions led to this state of decay and, consequently, what else is lost when these pieces of infrastructure fall apart.2

But rather than read the ostensibly ruined space of the shantytown as marker of progress or decline, this essay is more interested in the political or social forms that attach to and actually thrive within this space. The Bridge’s death as a piece of infrastructure and rebirth as a shantytown is a story with more than one implication. Most clearly, the destruction of the Bay
Area Bridge reflects the dramatic decline of the state in the face of capitalist expansion and environmental catastrophe. To the extent the Bridge flourishes in its second life as a shantytown, however, it offers evidence of another timeline: the long and multifaceted lifespan of precarity as a condition produced by, and then set against, capitalist society. By focusing on the latter, this essay offers insight into how Gibson’s Bridge novels can mobilize a vision of the past—in this case, the precarious life associated with the shantytown—without articulating a regressive or conservative vision of the future. Rather, this essay argues that in Gibson’s texts the shantytown is not a symptom of our post-industrial future but rather something that is already embedded in American society. By drawing from this oft-neglected history and projecting it into the future, the Bridge novels acknowledge the vulnerability that we share and would prefer to ignore—and which provides the basis for forging political affiliations through mutual insecurity.

In other words, Gibson’s fiction does not valorize the shantytown per se but rather the emphatic expression of vulnerability that it locates here. In doing so, the novels animate conceptualizations of precarity as a growing matter of concern. Specifically, they dramatize a distinction between precariousness as a building block for social equality and precarity as a tool for social control. To bring this theoretical context into clearer view, this essay reads the model of inter-dependency in Gibson alongside the concept of precarious life as defined by scholars such as Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey. For these sources, precariousness denotes the state of individual insecurity that characterizes social life: because our lives depend on others in ways big and small, this reasoning follows, we share in a fundamental vulnerability. Further, Butler stresses the idea that the apprehension of shared vulnerability in the self and others may provide the basis for more egalitarian politics. But as Lorey has subsequently noted, this vulnerability is not evenly distributed. According to Lorey, the term precariousness designates a “socio-
ontological dimension” of human life, while the term precarity refers to the unequal distribution of vulnerability in society. While precariousness is shared, the experience of insecurity is subject to “political, social, and legal compensations” (Lorey et al. 11,12). In other words, the prevailing social order masks the full extent of this vulnerability for certain segments of the population, while others are left to experience their precariousness more nakedly.

This last point helps identify the work speculative narratives like Gibson’s do to expose this inequality, and, in doing so, meditate on new forms of social life that embrace rather than mask precariousness. By attending to precarity in its various forms, the Bridge narratives contribute to the growing field surrounding the subject of precarity literature. Much of the work in this field is limited to narratives that approach precarious life in the present by way of realistic description and stylistic forms inspired by documentaries or autobiographical life writing. In view of these critical debates, this paper makes the case for expanding the scope of research on the subject of precarity literature to account more fully for the interventions that speculative fiction in general and Gibson’s novels in particular offer. In their consideration of precarity as an object of concern, Gibson’s novels explore the ongoing, historical, and affective aspects to precarity. The first portion of the paper therefore identifies the historical parallels between Gibson’s presentation of the Bridge and sociological writings about the shantytown in the US. Having located the shantytown mise-en-scène in this historical context, the essay foregrounds how this shanty template attaches to and informs the geopolitical framing to Gibson’s narratives. His skeptical view of neoliberalism informs the political subtext to the Bridge—or, more specifically, the community that resides there in an interdependent state of vulnerability. The shantytown is a distinct space in this narrative because it does nothing to hide its fundamental state of precariousness, a concept that encompasses both “bodily dependency and need” as well
as “the forms of social trust that let us live and thrive” (Butler "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation" 147).

This analysis of precarity in the Bridge series ultimately expands on existing criticism of Gibson’s fiction and, in particular, the political subtext to his work. In particular, Gibson’s apparent valorization of the Bridge has been the subject of debate to his critics, who have characterized his rendering of the shanty community in the novels as an expression of nostalgia. Intervening in this debate, the final pages of this paper consider how Gibson’s nostalgic rendering of the Bridge enables, rather than hinders, the novel’s radical imagination. While his texts avoid fully realizing a utopian society, they nonetheless identify ruptures in the master narrative of neoliberalism that places the individual above society: the product of urban displacement, the shantytown nonetheless recalls social formations that once protected diversity on the basis of mutual self-interest. In this way, the novels’ embedded nostalgia for the shantytown—or, more specifically, the forms of “social trust” practiced within this space—is a crucial component to how they locate a manner of precariousness in the future that resists dystopia. This account ultimately adds a necessary level of nuance to any account of how Gibson’s fiction represents or otherwise engages with multiculturalism. Both artifact and omen, the Bridge in fact creates a counter-narrative to the reactionary nostalgia we might associate with, among other things, nativist politics. While these latter cases recognize only a small segment of people as precarious and worthy of social inclusion, the shantytown model asks us to consider the more structural conditions that make precariousness a fundamental aspect of life, and what types of social models might engender a more equal form of insecurity. While Gibson’s novels avoid describing more straightforward utopian spaces—the Bridge is, after all, still tethered to the society that surrounds it—this omission does not limit their ability to engage with
radical thinking. Rather, the interstitial space of the Bridge showcases a society that, literally engulfed by a neoliberal dystopia, still manages to practice a more equitable form of shared vulnerability.

The Shantytown Narrative

*Virtual Light*, the first in the trilogy of Bridge novels, was published in 1993 during the period of anti-regulation market policy, the signing of the NAFTA accords, and the fall of the Soviet Union. The setting of the Bridge novels consequently emphasizes its connection to ongoing social problems: unlike Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and the “Sprawl” trilogy, published between 1984 and 1988, the Bridge series is set in a future only scant years away from the time of the novels’ publication, and as a result depicted a world largely similar to the readers’ own. The novels thus to various degrees touch on the fallout associated with the fractious geopolitics of the 1990s. In general, the narratives are set against the backdrop declining nation-states and the concomitant rise of strong transnational corporate entities, which race to control emergent technology in the field of nanotechnology and cyberspace. Each book focuses on different stages of this fight, with the Bridge shantytown acting as the primary locus for resisting corporate antagonists. In *Virtual Light*, a transnational corporation hatches a plan to rebuild San Francisco using advanced nanotechnology, which would further displace the city’s poor population while at the same time ensconcing the wealthy in fortified towers. The site shifts in *Idoru* from San Francisco to Tokyo, where once again a group of disparate individuals are bound together by mutual self-interest to resist corporate forces that are engaged in a vast surveillance campaign. The final book in the series, *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, returns to San Francisco to stage a
climactic fight between the allies of the Bridge dwellers and the global corporations that are eager to destroy the Bridge. Read together, the Bridge series explores the various aspects to late capitalism—the development and uneven distribution of technology, the saturation of mass media in society, and stark wealth inequality—that create sites like the Bridge, which in turn become havens for those who resist the status quo.

While the series as a whole depicts a small band of characters resisting the agents of corporate capitalism, the Bridge is the overarching setting and symbol of this fight. In contrast to the forces that fight for control—of, say, emergent technologies and new markets—the Bridge signifies what happens when control is replaced by the principle of “unorganized cooperation” (Gibson All 275). The books explain that the Bridge’s original life as a piece of infrastructure ended after a massive earthquake destroyed much of the transit lines linking both sides of the Bay Area in the early twenty-first century. The Bridge was shut down and, after a new tunnel bypassed the original transit paths, fell into disuse. By the time of the events in the novel, the Bridge has become a shantytown metropolis, a massive conglomeration of squatters who have turned the derelict piece of infrastructure into a functioning society. The early descriptions of the shanty in Virtual Light showcase the scale of this shantytown:

Its steel bones… were lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, gaming arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars… while above them, rising to the very peaks of the able towers, lifted the intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and its zones of more private fantasy. (Virtual 70)

The Bridge embodies the complex politics attached to social spaces in the Gibson’s fiction. On one level, the repurposing of this space clearly gestures to the extensive breadth of poverty and societal collapse that has displaced untold people and pushed them into previously uninhabitable
spaces. At the same time, the “barrio” thrives not in spite of its fringe locale but because of it. Indeed, the absence of state authorities or large capitalist institutions has not precluded a type of bare capitalism from emerging. Rather, the reference to levels of “private fantasy,” ordered on the basis of purchasing power, makes it clear that Gibson’s shanty space is not interested in rejecting capitalism per se. But the narrative is careful to reiterate this societal organization comes as the result of consensus from within the community. The origin of the Bridge further reiterates this point. One of the original Bride dwellers, Skinner explains that the decision to migrate to and repurpose the Bridge was at once spontaneous and widespread among a thoroughly marginalized population: “Shit happens. No signals, no leader, no architects. You think it was politics. That particular dance, boy, that’s over” (Virtual 101).

In the Bridge series, the combination of economic upheaval and environmental collapse displace a sizeable portion of the population. But if Gibson speculates about the effects of late stage capitalism on Americans, he also draws on a specific version of the past in order to make this point. The narrative foregrounding of the shanty community is most useful to this end inasmuch as it casts light on a relatively neglected aspect of American urban development. Indeed, the shantytown has largely been relegated to the margins of US history, even though it was once a site evocative of both poverty and collective action during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lisa Goff outlines this veiled history in her comprehensive account of shantytown history in the US. “Our nation has a long, untold history of shantytowns, stretching from the early days of industrialization in the 1820s through the Great Depression of the 1930s,” she explains. “They constitute an alternative vision of American urban space, one that embodies the working class’s evolving vision of itself between 1820 and 1940” (xiii). While various factors contributed to the decline of the shantytown from the public eye in the US—chief among
them, tightened housing policy codes from the New Deal era—Goff also argues that Americans today collectively understand the shantytown “as a symptom of ‘global south’ industrial development with no roots in American history” (vii, 250). Thus, even sympathetic accounts of modern shantytowns adjacent to American urban centers—along, for example, the Mexican-US border—“are unaware of this connection to our own history” (250). While Goff is in this instance describing journalistic and documentary crews that observe these sites, her claim is relevant for readers of speculative texts such as Gibson’s that gesture to this specific, overlooked history of shanty development.

Considering the shantytown as a once and future site of precarious life already indicates the type of alternative history implicit in Gibson’s narrative. The work of Nels Anderson, an ethnographer whose work in the 1920s helped codify American vagrancy and its various subcultures, brings the shape and figurative associations of this alternative history into further relief. Published in 1923, Anderson’s *The Hobo* revised the sociology of homelessness by offering the most comprehensive account of vagabondage at that date. In Anderson’s case, the shantytown is the material manifestation of a systemic problem in which certain populations are occluded from a changing economy. Robert E. Park, an influential figure in early sociology and Anderson’s editor at the University of Chicago, makes this last point especially clear in his introduction to *The Hobo*: “If it is true that man made the city, it is quite as true that the city is now making man” (v). He further points to Chicago as a city whose “changing population” of “homeless men… has created a milieu in which new and unusual personal types flourish and new and unsuspected problems have arisen” (vi). At once, the shantytown is a last resort and a place for collective empowerment for the people who come to reside there.

Anderson’s description of the jungle, the transient communities where vagrants take
refuge, both restates and anticipates other writings that valorize vagabond democracy. For Anderson, the shanty revolves around a social model whose inclusiveness stands in stark contrast with the surrounding city. “Absolute democracy reigns in the jungle,” he writes. The basic democratic values practiced in these sites include a form of multiculturalism as well. “Negroes, Mexicans, and whites… share the same jungle. The jungle is the melting pot of trampdom” (19). Anderson’s ethnography crucially distinguishes the jungle from the “hobohemia” culture that exists in the city, where racial stratification is the rule. Positioned on the city’s margins, the jungle draws together a racially diverse population of people—albeit predominantly men, Anderson makes clear—whose transient mobility guarantees a level of social equality. “Here is one place where every man’s past is his own secret,” he continues. “They live closed lives and grant others the same privilege” (20). Throughout his study, Anderson argues that the ephemeral quality of the men who pass through these communities is the foundation for their functioning democracy.

The key feature in both this sociological account of US shantytowns and Gibson’s presentation of the Bridge is the overriding diversity of the people who live there. Rydell, a central character in *Virtual Light* and *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, stresses this point upon his first visit to the Bridge. Although he had heard horror stories about the Bridge’s inhabitants, he is surprised to find himself in a humming, sustaining society. “This place had just grown,” he explains, “it looked like, one thing patched onto the next, until the whole span was wrapped in this formless mass of stuff” (*Virtual* 194). The broad collection of materials that comprises the Bridge mirrors the population therein. Rydell continues: “They looked to be as mixed a bunch as their building materials, all ages, races, colors” (*Virtual* 194). The description in this instance provides useful insight into the social model that operates within this shanty metropolis. Most
importantly, the people there draw a form of solidarity around the Bridge community: they are not, as numerous characters explain, homeless in the conventional sense of the word even as they live outside the nominal bounds of civil society. Along similar lines, they are leaderless but still united by their shared interest in maintaining the precarious stability of the Bridge. Finally, they are thoroughly diverse in their racial, cultural and geographical origins. The shanty space collects and, the novel indicates, respects difference even as inhabiting in the space brings on a collective form of social responsibility deriving from mutual self-interest.

Both refuse and refuge, the Bridge provides at its core a social model for embracing precariousness in all of its attendant forms. Gibson’s presentation of the space repeatedly makes the point that the Bridge is nothing if not tenuous in its operation. Chevette, who lives on the Bridge and feels a sense of prideful attachment to it, “felt best… on the suspension bridge,” an apt metaphor for the delicate balance the Bridge society strikes between fringe space and urban space (Virtual 150). Most apparently, it exists in tension with the conventional social structures that envelope it. While the people on the Bridge draw a communal identity from their mutual inhabitance of this space, they each know that it is always in danger of being absorbed back into the prevailing social order by force or otherwise. The inherently transient nature of vagrant life likewise marks the limited lifespan of the jungles that Anderson describes in his ethnographic work: people come and go as their needs might dictate (20). In other cases, even thriving jungles are subject to police eviction or mob violence at any given moment. Anderson further notes in his study that law enforcement will ascribe any number of crimes to people who reside in the shantytown, taking this association as the pretense for tearing down the community as a whole (Anderson and Rauty 47).
If the shanty social model in these cases appears limited in its application to our sense of the real world, I argue that the precariousness of these spaces also speaks to their potential for re-making social models that are more accommodating of the diverse bodies that inhabit an inherently mixed and mobile society. In both Anderson’s ethnography and Gibson’s novel, there is the strong implication that the shanty poses a threat to the prevailing social order, which in turn evinces an overriding interest in destroying this community. Most immediately, the bare form of cooperation in the shanty or jungle puts into relief the extent to which the surrounding city space is subject to staunch stratification along racial and class lines. While the latter appears to separate and categorize, the former foregrounds the mutual dependencies that keep the community operating. To be sure, there is an underlying valorization of the type of rugged liberalism that the vagabond symbolizes in both Gibson’s fiction and Anderson’s ethnography. In Gibson’s case in particular, however, the clearly fictive aspects to the narrative—its futuristic framing as well as its creation of the Bridge community itself—help to delimit the scope of precarious life to the extent it actively imagines models for resisting forces that would debilitate collective action.

Alternate Histories and Precarious Life

The central plot device in Virtual Light in particular illustrates how the shantytown reveals the type of vulnerability that the socio-economic status quo works to conceal. The virtual light device referenced in the book’s title operates akin to augmented reality technology: when the wearer puts on the glasses, she sees a projection of data and information projected onto the scene before her. The glasses, the novel explains, contain “EMP-drivers around the lenses” in
order to send visual data to “your optic nerves direct”: “Put ’em on, you go out walking, everything looks normal but every plant you see, every tree, there’s this little label hanging over there, what its name is, Latin under that” (*Virtual* 133-134). The specific glasses in the narrative contain data detailing a plan by the Sunflower Company, a global corporate conglomerate based in Singapore, to remake San Francisco post-earthquake using nanotechnology—and further remove the poor population who have already been displaced by decades of urban stratification and, in the narrative’s world, a catastrophic earthquake. Chevette stumbles upon this schematic when she equips the virtual light glasses for the first time: facing the urban landscape, she sees through the lenses “towers blooming… buildings bigger than anything, a stone regular grid of them, marching in from the hills” (*Virtual* 158). The company stops at nothing to keep these plans secret: the last half of the novel involves Chevette and Rydell escaping from an assassin the company has sent to kill them and retrieve the glasses. In the narrative, the virtual light device is valuable because it contains sensitive information about the corporation’s plans for urban development. But more to the point, the information is dangerous due to what it reveals about capitalism more generally: in short, it enables one to visualize simply the breadth and scale of capitalist power, via its creation of socially homogenous urban space, in real time.

The scale of this threat becomes clearer in sight of how the novels characterize the Bridge dwellers, who likewise reveal the nature of capitalist power. Simply put, they make manifest the limitations to the capitalist status quo to the extent they reveal insecurity to be an everyday facet of life rather than something to be abolished at all costs. Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* helpfully elucidates what is at stake in this case. Drawing from the likes of Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, Fisher argues that capitalism sustains itself in part because it has thoroughly propagated the sense that there can be no alternative to it. This ideology, Fisher explains,
involves “a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (16). In this light, one can see how much of the conflict in *Virtual Light* (and later, the rest of the Bridge series) hinges on keeping this imaginative barrier intact, and how the Bridge threatens this project simply by performing the fact of its own insecurity. Of course, to acknowledge precarious life does not necessarily result in the end of exploitative social practices or of capitalism writ large. But it does open the door to imagining new social forms that reject the violent marginalization of vulnerable people upon which these practices rely.

The presentation of capitalist agents working to both produce and conceal inequality, and the threat the bare vulnerability poses to this project, extends across the Bridge narratives. The living spaces that the Sunflower Company builds are the embodiment this project: they are self-contained so that they require little contact with the outside world whose population is growing more vulnerable. But, as Lorey explains, the belief that insecurity can be excised from social life is “nothing other than a fantasy of omnipotence. Although they need protection, living bodies can never be completely protected” (Lorey et al. 20). Throughout the Bridge series, agents of corporate capitalism take any means necessary to conceal this fact. In *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, the last book of the trilogy, this conflict comes to a climax. Here the primary corporate antagonist is Harwood, who runs a “public relations empire” and is a major force behind nanotech corporations like Sunflower (*All* 194). Harwood explains that what these corporate entities want—and what he is dedicated to providing them—is “normalization” (*Gibson All* 174). The process of normalization, Harwood goes on to say, historically has involved the development of “bohemias” inside the city before bringing these sites “back into the fold” of the status quo. These alternative enclaves, he says, “were where industrial civilization went to
dream” (Gibson All 174). In this scenario, capitalism strengthens its ideological embeddedness by taking ostensibly anti-capitalist practices and incorporating them into itself. Thus, as Fisher explains, “capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its ‘system of equivalence’ which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or Das Kapital, a monetary value” (4). In the context of the Bridge novels, corporate conglomerates actually see alternative enclaves as a net positive, so long as they can monetize the forms of art these societies are producing or the drugs they are ingesting. What cannot be sold in this manner is destroyed. In either case, the status quo is insulated against antagonistic communities.

The shanty model at the Bridge is resistant to incorporation, however, because its defining characteristic—solidarity in vulnerability—is not something that can be commodified in the same way. The novels therefore make the case that the Bridge is a problem to entities like the Sunflower Company precisely because its precarious population, unlike the leisure-seeking members of the city, inhabits—and are therefore fully cognizant of—the fundamental vulnerability that characterizes social life. In All Tomorrow’s Parties, Harwood admits that shanty communities like the Bridge “seem not to lend themselves to recommodification” in the same way the urban “bohemas” did (Gibson All 175). The self-sufficient skyscrapers the Company plans to construct in Virtual Light are appealing to the extent that they perpetuate a fantasy of isolation from society, whereas the Bridge—as well as the plans contained on the virtual light device—make abundantly clear the extent to which the actions of one population segment affects all others. Lorey, Butler, and Lauren Berlant have written extensively on the interdependency inherent to precarious life, or as Lorey terms it the “socio-ontological dimension of lives and bodies” (Lorey et al. 15). At its core, understanding precariousness as an
essential condition of life involves acknowledging the dependencies and vulnerabilities we share with others. Lorey argues in *State of Insecurity* that while neoliberalism has effectively weaponized precarity in the form of an insecure labor market, there is more to be said about what recognizing precarity can engender in the form of social justice. Precarity involves “threat and coercion,” she explains, “even while it opens up new possibilities of living and working. Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency” (1). Lorey further indicates that our internalization of neoliberal discourse is nowhere else more evident than in our understanding of “being exposed to contingency” not in terms of interconnectedness but only as a “nightmare” scenario of deprivation and lack (1).

On the whole, these accounts of precarity clarify the role insecurity might play in producing a more equitable society. But, as Lorey points out, the major obstacle on this path consists in our own ability to imagine insecurity as anything other than a condition to be avoided. In making this point, Lorey explicitly expands on Michel Foucault’s understanding of self-government as an expression not of autonomy but one of obedience to an overarching power regime (3). Along these lines, she argues that the deeply embedded ideology of neoliberalism is the primary problem with any attempt to turn chronic instability—something that more and more people share—into the basis for effective popular protests or collective action. In other words, too many people reject insecurity as the basis for collective action because they have, in effect, have already given their obedience to governmental or corporate institutions that offer the prospect of security. As this last point suggests, Lorey’s formulation leaves little room to imagine immediate remedies under the auspices of existing social democratic regimes in the US. Pressing questions in turn emerge: what responsibility do we have to prevent others and ourselves from exposure to contingency—in spite of its potential for better humanistic
understanding—when this might involve “danger” or bodily harm? To what extent should we safeguard the last remnants of a welfare state that, while providing some basis for collective representation, also has in Lorey’s terms “naturalized differences of bodies… on the basis of universalized, standardized measure of superiority that produced precarity”? (70) Accounts such as Lorey’s strongly suggest that there is no immediate remedy because our ability to imagine precariousness in its most humanitarian sense is inherently limited by our internalization of neoliberal discourse in general and our orientation within unresponsive political systems in particular.

In context of this debate, the speculative framing to the Bridge novels provides one way of visualizing precarious life at the limits of this prevailing social order. In Gibson’s case, the Bridge is precarious on every level. As a society, it subsists only so far as it can scavenge, rather than produce, the goods necessary for its survival: the Bridge people re-claim, re-assemble and re-purpose the flotsam from the surrounding global marketplace. In the narratives as well, characters associated with the Bridge ultimately rely on other groups and individuals to thwart the novel’s antagonists. For instance, Rydell in Virtual Light hatches a plan with a hacker collective called the Republic of Desire, who uses its vast network of surveillance and data collection to attack the Sunflower Company’s agents. The Bridge’s dependent position in both of these cases only further emphasizes the essential condition of precariousness that permeates this society. Indeed, Rydell ultimately wins the Republic of Desire’s support by convincing them of their shared vulnerability in relation to the Sunflower Company. The relative autonomy from intrusive surveillance that the hackers depend upon will disappear, Rydell explains, when the company’s plan to rebuild San Francisco comes to fruition. As is the case throughout the novel, the Bridge’s population operates behind a common drive to survive and to maintain this
uncertain position. In short, the Bridge’s radicalism derives not from its complete disavowal of capitalism per se but rather from its rendering of the prevailing socio-economic system in a bare light and by imagining a more equitable alternative. If the Bridge falls short of visualizing a way to move entirely outside capitalism, its alternative society enables better scrutiny of the more pernicious institutions that exist in and outside the narrative.

The imaginative potency of the shanty in the Bridge derives from its invocation of historical precedents for the type of precarious communities that appear in Gibson’s fiction. In addition to the historical parallel noted above, it is crucial to note that the texts look outside the domestic context of the US as well. Although this essay has focused primarily on US precedents for the shantytown, studies centering on the Global South have elsewhere analyzed the alternative social forms that take shape within shanty communities. For example, AbdouMaliq Simone describes the “makeshift… ways of being social” in urban centers in cities like Lagos. Simone points to outwardly “wrecked” sites in these cities where people nonetheless create makeshift financial and infrastructural tools to “make substantial things happen” ("Assembling" 79). The task of making “more visible” the extent to which urban centers are operating along these makeshift networks—especially when “the predominant image may be one of disorganization”—is a key issue for, among others, urban decision-makers in Africa where these makeshift communities exist ("Resource" 515).

While locating the shantytown in the historical fabric of US, the novels also acknowledge the viability of precarious shanty communities outside this context. Indeed, Gibson explicitly identifies the extent to which shanty sites outside of the US influenced his figuration of the Bridge. In his prefatory note to Idoru, the second work in the Bridge series, he notes that the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, or Hak Nam, “provided most of the texture for the Bridge”
in *Virtual Light* (*Idoru* np). The real Walled City Gibson refers to in this case came into existence after Hong Kong came under British control in 1898. Originally a fort established to protect the salt trade, the site eventually fell into a state of neglect. Large-scale movement of refugees and homeless populations after World War II precipitated a massive growth in the Walled City’s squatter population, which eventually encompassed more than 30,000 people in buildings as tall as 13 stories during the 1980s. By the time Gibson is writing *Idoru*, however, British and Chinese authorities had already begun to dismantle the enclave.

The history of the Walled City becomes a major focal point in *Idoru*, which is largely set in Japan. Read in tandem with Gibson’s other Bridge novels, the description of the Walled City brings into focus his characteristic allusion to the Far East as a space where advanced technologies circulate. Rez, a mega-celebrity rock star, announces his intention to marry an *idoru* (or idol), a synthetic personality that resides entirely in virtual reality. In response, fans around the world speculate on possible ulterior motives behind Rez’s decision. One fan in particular, Chia, travels to Japan in order to investigate. Here, she comes into contact with shadowy hackers from with the Walled City, which in *Idoru* is virtual community that exists entirely “netside” (*Idoru* 122). The contrast between the Bridge and the Walled City as it appears in *Idoru* highlights Gibson’s overarching interest in detailing the unequal distribution of wealth and technological development both in and outside national boundaries. Taken together, both sites exemplify the type of precarious communities that embrace shared vulnerability as the basis for social life. For example, the Walled City is described as “a realm of consensual fantasy,” which already calls to mind parallels with the Bridge’s facilitation of bare exchange (*Idoru* 286). But whereas the Bridge makes this interdependency a public spectacle—to the extent it resides in plain sight of the surrounding urban landscape—the Walled City is visible only to those with the
proper technology to access its secret, virtual ports of entry. When Chia visits (via software “porting”) the Walled City for the first time, the narrative describes its “impossible” dimensions:

And then the thing before her: building or biomass or cliff face looming there, in countless unplanned strata, nothing about it even or regular. Accreted patchwork of shallow random balconies, thousands of small windows throwing back blank silver rectangles of fog. Stretching either way to the periphery of vision, and on the high, uneven crest of that ragged façade, a black fur of twisted pipe, antennas sagging under vine growth of cable. And past this scribbled border a sky where colors crawled like gasoline on water. (Gibson Idoru 181-182)

The sense of overwhelming scale in this description is also evident in the previous characterization of the Bridge. Both sites are dramatic cases of how the shanty model, which operates outside the law while still nominally existing within the confines of the city, can gather and orient vulnerable people toward radical action. Moreover, the allusion to the real Walled City here also provides more evidence for the viability for the shanty model in Gibson’s writing. In the context of the novels, the physical Walled City has been destroyed but its successor reappears in the virtual world, while the Bridge dwellers construct their own version of the mega shantytown in the US. The rendering of the former as a technological hub is also indicative of how Gibson in both the Sprawl and Bridge novels refers to the Far East: where the West is in decline, the East takes the lead in terms of technological development. As a result, the Walled City expands on the Bridge’s capacity to gather vulnerable people inasmuch as it exists online and consequently provides refuge to people from across the globe. In both cases, the precarious communities gathered in these vivid shantytowns find precedents or parallels that help make their imaginings of vulnerable society more viable.

At the same time, Gibson’s specific intersection of Asian cultural signifiers with advanced technology has been the subject of considerable controversy among his critics. In
contrast to my own reading of precarity in the Bridge novels, several critics have taken a different view of the political subtext to how Gibson approaches the problem of social inequality. As should be clear in view of the Bridge novels, Gibson’s work foregrounds the consequences of global capitalism on vulnerable populations. His work thus helped to shape science fiction’s toolset for staging social critique, especially in relation to “multinational corporate capitalism and the computer technologies that facilitated it” during the 1980s and 1990s (Rivera 429). At the same time, his strategies for representing the global breadth of capitalism have drawn particular scrutiny. According to Wendy Hui-Kyong Chun, his most prominent work often rearticulates hegemonic assumptions about whiteness, which Chun argues is expressed in his appropriation of Asian cultural signifiers in the form of “high-tech Orientalism” (Chun 178). In view of such critiques, scholars often value his fiction for its predictive powers but take exception to his reproduction of preexisting cultural norms in his speculative narratives. This latter interpretation figures heavily for sources arguing that the Bridge actually lament the twilight of American industrialism—and, more implicitly, the white working class—in the face of globalization and a post-industrial economy. For example, Gerald Miller remarks that, in the world described in Virtual Light, “squalor and pestilence are not limited to third-world countries but have penetrated even into first-world powers such as the United States and Japan” (85)(emphasis mine). According to these sources, Gibson does more than speculate on the future decline of the US and its associated economic and cultural institutions; he actively bemoans this loss.

But such critiques fail to account for the way the Bridge novels understand precarity as something that is globally distributed but that nonetheless assumes different forms in different contexts. As I have argued throughout, while Gibson’s texts imagine precarious life on a
dramatic scale, the type of social practices associated with these spaces in fact recall previous precarious societies. The description of the community on the Bridge is strikingly similar to the ethnographic description of shantytowns earlier in the twentieth century. Likewise, the Walled City is a point of inspiration for the Bridge novels, but the narrative of *Idoru* is careful to identity this virtual shanty metropolis as an extension of the actual shanty community at Hak Nam. Elsewhere, a character in *All Tomorrow’s Parties* locates both the Walled City and the Bridge among other real-world examples such as Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen, Denmark (*All 174*). In short, precarity circulates throughout these texts even as particular manifestations of precarious living take different forms in different areas. This rendering of precarity in turn complicates any facile categorization of the novels’ geopolitics. Most immediately, the claim that the Bridge novels imagine precarity moving from the East to the West ignores the extent to which vulnerability has historically already been a feature of life in the US. While Gibson’s narratives point to Hak Nam as a site where shantytowns have circulated, it also considers the historical and cultural legacy of these sites in the context of the United States. Whatever anxiety the novel registers about the future decline of the West, it therefore also acknowledges that the observable forms of vulnerability in the Global South already have a place in US society. While the Bridge takes shape in view of the real-world version of the Walled City, this influence does not negate the specific histories of precarity that existed in either region.

**Nostalgia and Precarity Politics**

While much of the critical debate outlined above has focused on Gibson’s fiction, his figuration of the Bridge also helps clarify the political framing to precarity as an emerging social
issue. For example, in his account of Gibson’s fiction Siddhartha Deb links the Bridge novels in particular to the recent rise in nativist politics in the US. According to Deb, the Bridge novels are essentially conservative in their recollection of history: the narratives celebrate the Bridge not because of its collection of precarious life, but because the Bridge itself is a reminder of the country’s glorious, industrial past. The death of the Bridge as a piece of infrastructure reflects, Deb concludes, Gibson’s nostalgic rendering of the implied history to this space, “a kind of lament for the vanished industrial age of the United States, one that valorized the white men and women who would have been heroes in those bygone days” (14). But while Deb rightly identifies the nostalgia that characterizes Gibson’s description of the Bridge, his reading overlooks the more veiled narrative of industrial-era shantytowns outlined above. Moreover, this assessment also presents nostalgia as inherently conservative in its attachment and political orientation. But if the Bridge articulates Gibson’s particular nostalgia for a bygone period, it also exemplifies the complex temporality inherent to nostalgic longing in the first place.

The Bridge novels emphasize the sense of nostalgic longing that precarity can produce, but they also make the case that this nostalgia need not be regressive. This point is most evident in the representation of the Bridge itself as the object of nostalgia for characters within the novels. For example, Chevette, a Bridge resident in *Virtual Light*, has long since moved away from this space by the time of *All Tomorrow’s Parties*. Far removed from her precarious life in the shantytown, Chevette has settled into a more conventional form of precarity while living among university students in Malibu. Here, she is a young adult looking for stable work, renting a room in a shared apartment, and unclear of what steps to take next. While Chevette in *Virtual Light* “felt best… on the suspension bridge,” the picture of precarity she experiences in *All Tomorrow’s Parties* is less spectacular in scale but more restrictive in affective force. The novel
adeptly makes manifest this fact in Chevette’s first scene. In *Virtual Light*, she was a bicycle courier who made a living by dashing in and around hectic urban streets before returning home to her precarious loft atop the Bridge. She makes her entrance in *All Tomorrow’s Parties* in what looks like much the same condition, until the narrative frame pulls back, as it were, to reveal that she is instead cycling on a stationary bike, riding down “the trainer’s illusion of a Swiss mountain road and trying to ignore the reek of moldy laundry from the other side of the drywall partition” (*All 32*). In contrast to her dynamic and insecure life on the Bridge, here she is literally locked in place. The contrast further brings into focus how speculative fiction comments on social phenomena that are deeply entrenched in society—and therefore may escape scrutiny—by way of dramatic amplification: the Bridge is a superlative expression of how vulnerability might actually provide the basis for a functioning society. The problem, these novels claim, lies not with the issue of vulnerability per se but with entities such that attempt to shield this expression of vulnerability from view by violently displacing this population. By depicting Chevette’s own encounter with the more mundane manifestations of precarity, Gibson further highlights the value of spaces like the Bridge in unveiling—via contrast in this instance—the different scales of precarious living that shape everyday life.

Chevette’s sense of displacement reiterates the inherent value in making insecurity an open aspect to social life. This idea is especially evident when Chevette finally returns to the Bridge in *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, and visits in the space she once shared with Skinner, an original Bridge dweller and her mentor. Specifically, the narrative describes “a feeling that she can’t name” when she returns to the site of her old shanty residence. Here, “it comes to her, she was sometimes happy, in the sense of being somehow complete, and ready for what another day might bring. And she knows she is no longer that, and that while she was, she scarcely knew it”
In the context of Gibson’s Bridge novels, Chevette’s nostalgia acknowledges the transience of the shantytown as a whole as much as it does the nostalgic longing for home. If the Bridge is a place where vulnerability was shared, then the loss of this space leaves her to feel the weight of her insecurity all the more starkly. In other words, Chevette evinces a sense of nostalgia for her home on the Bridge, but not because this space provided her with a sense of security. On the contrary, she marks the loss of the sense of completion that was the result of living in a community where her own insecurity, so to speak, was shared openly. Such an account offers a clear rejoinder to critics who understand the Bridge’s invocation of the past but fail to account for the nuanced history the narratives bring into view.

The history of precarity as expressed in the shantytown site consequently points in a more radical political direction. In order to elaborate further the dynamic between precarity and nostalgia, it is necessary to return briefly to the role nostalgic attachments play in shaping political discourse more generally. In an overview of the new “global class structure,” economist Guy Standing outlines three classes of what he terms the “precariat,” a new (if long in the making) class that emerged in the wake of debilitated welfare safety nets and chronic job instability:

The first consists of those dropping out of old working-class communities and families; mostly uneducated, they tend to relate their sense of deprivation and frustration to a lost past, real or imagined. They thus listen to reactionary populist voices of the far right and blame the second and even third variety of precariat for their problems. They might be called the atavists. […]

The second variety consists of migrants and minorities, who have a strong sense of relative deprivation by virtue of having no present, no home. They might be called the nostalgics. Politically, they tend to be relatively passive or disengaged, except for occasional days of rage when something that appears to be a direct threat to them sparks collective anger. […]

The third variety consists of the educated, who experience in their irregular labour and in the lack of opportunity to construct a narrative for their lives a sense of
relative deprivation and status frustration, because they have no sense of *future.*

(7-8)

In each case, Standing identifies a fractured sense of temporality that drives the precariat’s reaction against existing political structures. His categorization speaks to the specific power relationships that situate each specific subgroup while also identifying the overarching dynamic—that is to say, the present regime of neoliberalism—that pushes them all into a state of precarity. Thus, while migrant laborers and laborers from the “old working-class” alike might mourn their present separation from a comparatively idealized past, their respective historical narratives assume different forms. Specifically, the white working-class subject’s own imagined sense of privilege—that former state of prosperity that, this reasoning continues, has been taken away from him—opens up avenues for political activity that is distinct from (and targets) the other precarious groups.

To be sure, Standing’s presentation of the precariat as a new social class leaves room for debate. By definition, the precariat denotes a population that cuts across conventional economic, political and geographical boundaries. Indeed, critics elsewhere have made the case that the form of unstable life that defines Standing’s precariat is in fact the essential feature of governmental power during this recent phase of neoliberalism and thus makes categorical distinctions of this sort too narrow in scope. At the same time, the underlying sense of alienation in relation to time in Standing’s precariat makes a powerful case for more capacious understandings of how nostalgia extends across disparate political groups, albeit in different affective forms. The “reactionary populist voices” that Standing identifies define themselves in relation to a shared past that may be “real or imagined.” According to Standing, the fictive basis to nostalgic longing does little to mitigate a given group’s resentment that, taken to the voting booth, might result in
substantial policy changes. Svetlana Boym also makes this last point especially clear when she remarks that “the mix of nostalgia and politics can be explosive” (10).

Taken together, sources like Standing and Boym bring into focus the strong role affective or experiential responses to precarity have in generating political action. Standing’s conceptualization of how temporal alienation—whether it be in relation to an imagined past or an anticipated future—transforms into political activity also helps to identify the complex temporality and deeply political framing to Gibson’s Bridge. As I have suggested, Gibson’s nostalgic rendering of the Bridge provides an avenue for imagining alternative forms of social affiliation so long we understand the inherent ambiguity inherent in both nostalgia as well as precarity. As discussed above, for Butler and Lorey the insecurity associated with precarious life has been turned against workers in the form of contingent work; but as they further argue, contingency need not connote danger so long as we recognize it as an essential component of social life. While nostalgia is often thought of something that constrains or restricts, it may also provide for new and radical futures. I draw here from Boym’s description of nostalgia as “as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (7). For Boym, nostalgia is expressive of not only “a sentiment of loss and displacement,” but also “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (7). In other words, nostalgic attachments are not limited to a specific place or time; rather, they are capacious and responsive to “the needs of the present” (8). As a result, nostalgia assumes a “utopian dimension,” one in which “the fantasies of the past… have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (8). In other words, nostalgia exerts a powerful affective force owing to, rather than in spite of, the fictive basis of nostalgic stories.

Following Boym, one needs to look forward in order to understand why one looks back—and Gibson’s Bridge novels showcase how speculative fiction contributes to that project.
Indeed, to extent they delimit this structural component to inequality, speculative texts such as Gibson’s supplement what critics have termed precarity literature—a body of work that has largely hinged on the depiction of contingent labor in genres such as documentary film, autobiographies, and realist fiction. The Bridge series are an exemplary case of how speculative writing can expand the critical evaluation of precarity literature in more ways than one. Most immediately, these novels showcase the genre’s interest in documenting ongoing social trends by way of extrapolation and amplification. In Gibson’s case, the observable problem of growing socio-economic stratification becomes the key subtext to the explicit depiction of poverty and precarity throughout the Bridge trilogy. In addition, the Bridge novels make the case for expanding the scope of precarity literature not only in terms of genre but also of chronology. Butler’s own formulation locates precarious life as a preeminent concern after the events of 9/11, when “an unbearable vulnerability was exposed” on a global scale (Precarious Life xi). While Butler’s work does not, of course, foreclose any investigation into precarity before 2001, works like Gibson’s assist in any effort to understand the timeline of precarious life as a literary subject across the last several decades.

As I have argued, the Bridge novels epitomize how the staging to speculative fiction, as much as anything in its formal toolset, already calls attention to the diverse manifestations of precarious life. Inasmuch they cast a light on the future of precarious life, the narratives open up a space for counterprogramming dominant social narratives—namely, by embracing an alternative historical narrative that foregrounds rather than veils mutual insecurity. The Bridge texts portray current social trends taken to their logical ends, especially in relation to the petty destructiveness of late capitalism and the deterioration of state agencies. For Gibson’s novels, the shantytown poses an alternative to the surrounding urban space (and the corporate forces that
govern it) but it does not exist entirely outside this society. As a result, this shantytown model for precarious solidarity is nothing if not tenuous in its operation inasmuch as it, no matter its resistance to social norms, still must remake and redeploy the products of the surrounding society for survival. The Bridge instead invites the characters within the novels, and the readers of these texts, the occasion to consider how insecurity might contribute to rather than restrain more inclusive social formations. Understanding the shantytown as an ambiguous setting in this sense still does work to reveal the various forms that precarity assumes in the present.13

Ultimately, the nuanced framing to the shantytown in Gibson’s fiction opens up new readings of structural precarity, its histories, and its possible future. As this essay has argued, the shantytown embodies both historical as well as future forms of precarious society: the Bridge dwellers are the displaced people of the economy who come to share in their vulnerability, and the shantytown itself is a largely forgotten relic of industrialism in the United States that reemerges in the post-industrial era. In both cases, the Bridge brings together aspects of the economy that neoliberal institutions would prefer to stay invisible. The most salient critique of post-industrial capital in the novels consequently highlights the extent to which mega corporations like the Sunflower Company veil this shared instability in the interest of expanding private control over social life. The value of the Bridge in this context lies in its ability to render bare and visible the basic form of interdependency at the center of life. The Bridge is, after all, completely dependent on the surrounding urban landscape for its survival—but, as the novels make clear, this dependency is a problem less for the Bridge dwellers and more for the forces that sell the fantasy of self-sufficiency. In addition to this performance of preciousness, the Bridge disturbs this capitalist narrative by finding historical precedents to its shanty community. In the context of expanding globalization, the futuristic shantytown mise-en-scène in Gibson
speaks to this this specific story: not the monolithic narrative of an idealized past but its ambivalent counter-narrative. The reactionary narrative imagines a past moment of security and stability that has since been lost; the counter-narrative embraces insecurity as a potential model for a more progressive polity. To the extent Gibson’s fiction reanimates this history’s subversive elements, it makes the concept of equality via shared vulnerability appear less the realm of fantasy and more one of necessity.
Notes

The author wishes to thank the many readers who contributed to this paper, his colleagues at the Centre for “Uses of Literature,” the participants at the NordWel Summer School, and the anonymous reviewer for Studies in the Fantastic. This essay was written with financial support from the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF127).

1 Gibson has described how ongoing social unrest and privatization in the US (and in Los Angeles in particular) influenced his speculative narrative. In an interview conducted during the composition of Virtual Light, for example, he claims that LA has already “slipped over the Fault into the 21st century” and points to Mike Davis’s City of Quartz as providing crucial documentation of this shift (Fischlin et al. 4).

2 In addition, Helen J. Burgess studies ruined infrastructure in speculative narratives from, among others, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Orson Scott Card. She argues that the images of ruined highways in these works incite a longing (for protagonists and readers alike) for a return not “to a pastoral lost time but for a golden age of technological progress that never really existed” (277). I expand on the link between Gibson’s figuration of the Bridge and nostalgia in the final section of this paper.

3 Gibson’s scrutiny of the link between speculative fiction, nostalgia, and politics extends across his career. His 1981 story “The Gernsback Continuum,” for example, targets the cherry depiction of future technology in pulp science fiction. The narrative decries this “dream logic,” which “knew nothing of pollution, and the finite bounds of fossil fuel, or foreign wars it was possible to lose” (“Gernsback” 32). Gibson’s concern for how nostalgia can often overlook—or worse, condone—unseemly points in the nation’s history also appears in his Bridge novels, albeit in a more implicit form than in “Gernsback.”

4 Liam Connell’s Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel, for instance, is organized around how novels realistically depict the consequences of trying "to shape a life in the modern workplace" (5). Sieglinde Lemke’s account of precarity in American culture is interested in biographically-inflected representations of poverty, and therefore takes up "personal accounts of economic and social precarity, as well as pleas... made on behalf of the dispossessed” (2).

5 The references to neoliberalism throughout this essay take shape in light of David Harvey’s influential A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Harvey defines neoliberalism as ”a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” via, namely, the promotion of private property rights and free trade at the expensive of governmental or public oversight (2). As I argue throughout, Gibson’s fiction explores this ideology via his depicted conflict between the vulnerable people of the Bridge and private property developers.

6 In an interview conducted in 2010, Gibson explains that the “secret” to the Bridge series was that they were actually “about the 1990s” (Newitz np).
Sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello provide a thorough account of this process of normalization in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. In their terms, capitalism is engaged in “continuous metamorphosis in the need for justification under fire from critique” (Boltanski and Chiapello 30). For example, they point to the bohemian expressiveness of the 1970s, which emphasized individual autonomy, as something that has been turned against workers in the form of contingent labor in the era of neoliberalism.

M. Keith Booker summarizes the critical debate over Gibson’s cyberpunk writings, explaining that scholars have alternatively praised such texts for their “believability as a projection from the present” and criticized them “for failing to imagine conditions that differ substantially from those already in place” (72). Gibson’s specific construction of white masculinity is the subject of critique for, among others, Chun and Deb.

According to Deb, Gibson’s early fiction anticipates white populism from the turn of the twenty-first century to extent it gives voice to white working-class fear. Deb’s article centers on *The Peripheral*, a novel written in view of a much more recent events than what precipitated the Bridge Trilogy in the early 1990s.

Lorey makes this point about a nearly-universalized spectrum of precarity especially clear throughout *State of Insecurity*. Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of “slow death” in *Cruel Optimism* also speaks to how precarity or unstable life is an essential apparatus for biopower in the post-welfare era of governance. The limitations to Standing’s dissemination of the precariat as designation for a new class have generated several responses. For example, Peter Frase questions the “coherence of the precariat” as a class given the complexity of this group’s relationship to labor and job security (12). Nonetheless, Standing’s formulation of loss in both material as well as temporal terms is useful here owing precisely to its broad applicability: though any number of people register loss (relating to, say, stable jobs and a good income), popular discussion tends to focus on one group’s loss (the white working class) rather than another’s. Such distinctions suggest that popular narratives influence the perception of precarity—for better or for worse.

For examples of recent scholarly sources that touch on a body of work called precarity literature, see Lawn; Morrison; and Connell.

Mike Davis makes this claim in *City of Quartz*—published the same year that “Skinner’s Room” debuted in the Visionary San Francisco exhibition—when he explains that “pulp science fiction” is “more realistic, and politically perceptive” than urban theory “in representing the programmed hardening of the urban surface” after years of neoliberal policy in the US (223).

Fredric Jameson’s discussion of what he terms Utopian formalism is also relevant to this reading of the Bridge. To the extent that the Bridge’s scavenger economy is ultimately captive to the larger economic mode of production that surround it, the narrative exemplifies the type of utopian settings that in Jameson’s words “serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (xiii).
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