

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Band:** 40 (2021)

**Artikel:** The tragedy of being-precarious in contemporary American drama  
**Autor:** Trüb, Simon D.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-977036>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 07.10.2024

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Tragedy of Being-Precarious in Contemporary American Drama

Simon D. Trüb

This chapter focuses on the concepts of precarity and precariousness, which prominently figure in critiques of neoliberalism. In particular, it establishes connections between precarity and precariousness, on the one hand, and the much older notions of tragedy and the tragic, on the other. Thus, it argues for the relevance of tragedy to contemporary political drama, while examining a neglected aspect of the prehistory of precarity studies. The first section of the chapter discusses the concepts of precarity, precariousness, tragedy, and the tragic, and it outlines some of the relationships among these notions. In the second part, the chapter considers the contemporary plays *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks and *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage. Both plays examine precarity, and the chapter maintains that it is important that they be regarded as tragedies. The chapter closes by reflecting on the political significance of the question of who or what qualifies as tragic and by locating at the center of tragedy a fundamental ambivalence. Approached in a skillful and careful manner, this ambivalence can become the wellspring of the force of politically powerful tragedies like *Topdog* and *Sweat*.

Keywords: precarity, precariousness, tragedy, neoliberalism, political theater, Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, Lynn Nottage, *Sweat*

On a first level and in the context of the present volume, this chapter is based on the well-established critical position according to which the concepts of precarity and precariousness represent important theoretical tools for analyzes of neoliberalism and thus also for discussions of the topics of “labor” or “work” roughly from the 1970s onwards. In this regard, it takes its cues from contemporary scholars such as Isabell Lorey, who argues: “If we fail to understand precarization, then we understand neither the politics nor the economy of the present” (1). Yet rather than mobilizing precarity/precariousness in a socio-political critique or applying them in a literary interpretation, this chapter establishes connections between these relatively recent concepts and the much older notions of “tragedy” and “the tragic.” In doing so, it examines, on the one hand, the importance of tragedy to contemporary political theater and, on the other hand, considers the “tragic” as early—potentially as the earliest—predecessor of precarity/precariousness.

Not all of the relationships between precarity, precariousness, tragedy, and the tragic are equally evident or uncontentious, and the first section of the chapter hence examines their nature and significance. On the one hand, this chapter adopts Judith Butler’s distinction between “precarity,” which refers to socio-economic vulnerability that ensues from a lack of resources, and “precariousness,” which denotes the ontological vulnerability of “life” or the human condition. On the other hand, it takes into account the frequently held view that “tragedy” and the “tragic” are used in at least three different ways, which Rita Felski, for instance, describes as literary, philosophical, and vernacular (2). According to the literary meaning or use, “tragedy” and the “tragic” primarily refer to the dramatic genre whose origins reach back to ancient Greece. The philosophical idea of tragedy or the tragic is significantly younger, for it emerged in German Idealist philosophy and revolves around the notion that the human condition is characterized by an “existential homelessness” (Felski 2–3). The vernacular use of “tragedy” or “the tragic” refers to the ways in which these terms are used in everyday discourse such as in newspaper headlines. From a literary perspective, the description of precarity or precariousness as “tragic” is contentious. While the relationship between the philosophical idea of the “tragic” and precarity appears equally questionable, this philosophical concept maps intriguingly well onto the notion of precariousness. These resistances and similarities are conceptually and ideologically significant. They are outlined in the first part of the chapter and consolidated in the discussions of the plays. *Topdog* and *Sweat* focus on the precarity of their characters and yet they are not always recognized as tragedies. While part two reflects on some of the reasons

for this, it also builds a strong case for considering the plays as tragedies. In particular, part two shows that the two plays dramatize a tragic structure or narrative that is at work in neoliberal society itself. This insight further illuminates the intimate relationships between precarity and precariousness, on the one hand, and tragedy and the tragic, on the other. Part two also reveals a disagreement between scholars regarding the status and possibilities of tragedy in contemporary culture and society. This conflict results from a tension or ambivalence inherent in tragedy itself, and the chapter concludes by recognizing in this ambivalence a driving force of contemporary politically powerful tragedies.

### Being-Precarious as Tragic Condition

The theoretical concept of precarity was first introduced in the late 1980s by French sociologists, who used it to describe a new kind—or rather an unprecedented growth of—economic insecurity in the West that directly resulted from the progressive neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state (Standing 9; Lorey 6; Lemke 16). The notion of precarity has since gained considerable critical currency and even become the center of an entire field of study. Simon During explains:

*Precarity* effectively invokes the insecurity of all those who live without reliable and adequate income or without papers. And it also applies to those with no, or unstable, access to the institutions and communities best able to provide legitimacy, recognition, and solidarity. (58, emphasis in original)

Thus, precarity is a socio-economic and political concept that describes a state of vulnerability that is directly linked to material deprivation and political representation. Importantly, During maintains that precarity replaced the older notion of “subalternity” because “[r]elatively geographically and culturally stable relations of dominance and subordination are being replaced by relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and insecurity” (58). However, the notion of “precarity” and particularly its prehistory is still more complex than this. During insightfully continues:

precarity extends beyond social and intellectual zones to connote an experience that is also an anthropological truth [...] the conditions of contemporary precarity lead us once again to recognize and accede to a particular account of what it is to be human. (59)

In other words, precarity *also* refers to the existential vulnerability of the human condition, and During accordingly establishes a connection between precarity and a long tradition in Western thought that conceives of the human condition as fundamentally flawed, fallen, or lacking. The history of this “anthropology of negation,” as During calls it, extends from the old Christian notion of original sin to the existential anguish variously considered in European philosophy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (59–60). Yet, in contrast to During, I argue that the “tragic,” which in some manifestations precedes even Christianity, also belongs to this “anthropology of negation” and that it consequently potentially even represents the earliest predecessor of precarity.

During evidently considers two very different dimensions of precarity, and Butler accounts for these in *Frames of War* by introducing the distinction between precarity and precariousness. “Precarity,” she explains, is a “specifically political notion,” while “precariousness” is an ontological or “existential” concept (Butler, *Frames* 3). However, even while introducing this distinction, Butler recognizes and emphasizes that these two kinds of vulnerability—existential or ontological, on the one hand, and material, on the other—are intrinsically connected and cannot be absolutely separated:

The “being” of the body to which this ontology [of precariousness] refers is one that is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others. It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. (Butler, *Frames* 2–3)

The notion of “social ontology” (my emphasis) takes into account that “bodies” or “lives” do not exist absolutely independently in a metaphysical realm before they are socially or culturally marked. The “social” in “social ontology” reinscribes the political, material dimension of being-precarious to which “precarity” refers in the metaphysical dimension of “precariousness” *at the very moment* at which Butler establishes this distinction. This raises the question of how precisely the relationship between “precarity” and “precariousness” can be understood. In *Frames*, Butler explains that precarity and precariousness are not equally distributed in society, and she speculates that “it is the differential allocation of precarity that [...] forms the point of departure for both a rethinking of bodily ontology and for progressive or left politics” (*Frames* 3). This is precisely Lorey’s aim in *States of Insecurity*, for Lorey argues that precarity

can be understood as the result of attempts to structure or distribute precariousness in accordance with social hierarchies:

The precariousness shared with others is hierarchized and judged, and precarious lives are segmented. This segmentation produces [...] the “differential distribution” of symbolic and material insecurities, in other words precarity. Precarity as the hierarchized difference in insecurity arises from the segmentation, the categorization, of shared precariousness” (21).

Insofar as precarity results from the unequal distribution of precariousness, they are both inherently related and yet distinct.

Now, from a literary, formalist, and rather conservative point of view, one could argue that neither precarity nor precariousness is “tragic” in any meaningful way. On the one hand, the association of these notions with tragedy could be considered anachronistic since precarity and precariousness are contemporary concepts while tragedy is an ancient genre. This critical position can be associated with scholars such as George Steiner, who argues in his influential, if contentious, *The Death of Tragedy* that “[f]rom antiquity until the age of Shakespeare and Racine, [tragedy] seemed within the reach of talent. Since then, the tragic voice in drama is blurred or still” (10). On the other hand, precarity in particular might be deemed to be foreign to tragedy since tragedy is supposed to represent the fall from grace of eminent figures, and it thus cannot be concerned with the fates and suffering of people belonging to lower social echelons. In *Modern Tragedy*, Raymond Williams insightfully explains that this formal criterion derives from reductive interpretations of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the Middle Ages, but like the notion of “the death of tragedy,” it is extremely persistent (21–22). As recently as 2014, Edith Hall remarks in an essay on tragedy and social class:

It [...] seems to me extraordinary that the addition of working-class heroes to the tragic repertoire [...] has still not found universal acceptance. In the twenty-first century there are still critics and writers who prefer their tragic heroes to fall from high estate and who question whether the tragic and the proletarian can ever be reconciled. (777)

So, from a literary perspective, the consideration of precarity or precariousness as “tragic” is controversial. By contrast, the philosophical idea of the tragic and the notion of precariousness reveal intriguing similarities. During’s “anthropology of negation” and Butler’s and Lorey’s discussions of “precariousness” are based on the conception of the human condition as fundamentally vulnerable, limited, and insufficient, which painfully

contradicts the individual human being's image of themselves as autonomous and complete. Summarizing Butler, Lorey explains, for instance, that "[p]recariousness becomes 'co-extensive' at birth, since survival depends from the beginning on social networks, on sociality and the work of others" (19). This dependence or finitude of life, however, is not a weakness that can be overcome, Lorey stresses, for "[t]he conditions that enable life are, at the same time, exactly those that maintain it as precarious" (20). Now, certainly, the register in which During, Butler, and Lorey write about existential vulnerability differs from the one in which 19<sup>th</sup>-century German Idealist philosophers and their contemporaries approached the notions of tragedy and the tragic. Philosophers and writers such as Kant, Schiller, Schlegel, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel are concerned with the limits of freedom, autonomy, and volition in ways in which contemporary philosophers or scholars of precarity/precariousness are not. And yet, insofar as both the philosophical notion of the tragic and precariousness revolve around the finitude of the human condition, these concepts are clearly related. The (philosophical) tragic and precariousness refer to or reveal a fundamental truth about the human condition, and it is intriguingly precisely for this reason that precarity falls short of the tragic from the philosophical perspective. In contrast to precariousness, precarity—economic, material vulnerability—is much too mundane for the metaphysical, elevated sphere of the tragic. Simon Goldhill observes in modernity, and specifically from German Idealism onward, a "devaluing of tragedies which do reveal most insistently a concern with a more immediate and messy sense of politics" (155). "'The tragic,'" he accordingly remarks, "has been a strategic and persuasive definition which has worked to keep the most evidently and directly political of ancient tragedies from the elite of the great books tradition" (156). So, while the association of precarity and precariousness with the tragic is controversial from a literary point of view, in the realm of philosophy, the strong connections between the tragic and precariousness can only be maintained or acknowledged as long as the continuity between precariousness and precarity is ignored. Yet, Butler and Lorey emphasize exactly the importance of appreciating and understanding this relationship between precarity and precariousness. Moreover, the political potential of Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Topdog/Underdog* and Lynn Nottage's play *Sweat* needs to be located precisely in their ability to illuminate this connection between precarity and precariousness, an ability whose significance and power are only properly appreciated if the plays are interpreted and discussed as tragedies.

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* and the Politics of Tragedy

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2002, features two African American characters named Lincoln and Booth. This play is an interesting example, because it reflects on the extent to which precarity is related both to class and race. Lincoln works in an arcade as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, and customers can pretend to shoot him, just as John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln in 1865. Booth, Lincoln's brother, named after John Wilkes Booth, is a petty criminal. He does not have a job, steals, and wants to become a three-card-monte player, a game at which Lincoln had excelled before he quit and found an "honest" job. Three-card monte is the street game in which ostensibly one player (but in fact a whole group of fraudsters) tries to trick naïve passersby into playing for money. Three cards are shuffled, and the unsuspecting victim has to pick the winning one, which is, of course, impossible. Lincoln and Booth lead an unmistakably precarious existence. Abandoned by their parents, who left each an "inheritance" of 500 dollars, they have only each other, live together in Booth's run-down apartment because Lincoln was thrown out by his last girlfriend, and survive exclusively on Lincoln's meager weekly paychecks. They have no phone, no running water, and only a bathroom shared by several apartments. When Lincoln learns that he might be fired because the arcade considers replacing him with a Lincoln dummy, their situation becomes dire. At the end of the play, Lincoln loses his job, spends his last paycheck on drinks in a bar, and is talked by Booth into playing three-card monte against him. Lincoln wins Booth's "inheritance" and, in response, is shot by Booth in their apartment. *Topdog* is an experimental play and not a typical tragedy. Neither is precarity its only topic. With its two black characters that are named after white historical figures, *Topdog* also reflects on American history, in particular on the ways in which American history is shaped by white people and by their perspective and discourse. Nevertheless, structurally and with regard to its subject matter, *Topdog* is a tragedy.

While some critics would certainly object to the description of a contemporary play like *Topdog* as tragedy, to most scholars familiar with Parks's oeuvre, this hardly comes as a surprise; Parks's love for and interest in this ancient Greek genre is well known and documented. In fact, in an interview, Parks herself compares *Topdog* to Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, maintaining:



[*Topdog*] is very much [...] in the Greek tragedy mode. Like *Oedipus*. When you go into the theatre, you know what's going to happen, and yet you delight in the journey of Oedipus. So I loved *Oedipus* and *Medea* and those kinds of plays, bloody, tragic, you know, heart wrenching. (qtd. in Kolin and Young 15)

With regard to Parks's dramaturgy more generally, Soyica Diggs Colbert insightfully explains Parks's vision or revision of "tragedy." Colbert observes that Parks's drama "contains traditional tragic elements: haunting, suffering and living with death and despair, and some formal attributes, most notably her use of choruses," and yet, "[it] does not fit neatly into literary definitions of tragedy," because it often focuses on "common" black people, whose freedom and independence are significantly curtailed as a result of their class and race (199–201). Drawing on "the thematic and formal attributes of dramatic tragedy," Colbert maintains,

Parks's drama rethinks historical narratives to loosen the hold of calamities, such as slavery and racialized violence, as determining factors for black subjects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries while acknowledging how those pasts continue to impact national narratives. (201–2)

How *Topdog* achieves precisely this, Patricia Stuelke discusses in her essay "Trayvon Martin, *Topdog/Underdog*, and the Tragedy Trap." Stuelke maintains that "tragedy in the post-Civil Rights era is a toxic racial narrative with which racial justice movements and black expressive culture must contend," and that *Topdog* succeeds in outlining a space "for the reinvention of political potential outside the limits of tragedy" by deconstructing what she calls the "American antiblack tragedy trap" (754, 755, 769). Discussing reactions to Trayvon Martin's death, Stuelke shows that in the U.S., black victims are often portrayed as tragic in two different but equally problematic ways. The first is illustrated by Barack Obama, who labelled Martin's death a tragedy and thus, according to Stuelke, rejected any kind of institutional responsibility. By describing Martin's death as a tragedy, Obama elevated Martin to the status of "victim protagonist" but at the same time represented him as "exceptional" and thus "[disavowed] the structural forces that produced his violent end" (Stuelke 757). The second way in which black people tend to be represented as tragic victims is illustrated by racist conservative reactions that portrayed Martin's death as an all but inevitable catastrophe, "the specific tragedy of black masculinity, a pathological underdeveloped racial and gender orientation that is [...] bent on self-annihilation" (759). These

two tragic roles, in which black victims are so readily cast and which distract from the ideological causes of their suffering and deaths, together form the “tragedy trap” that *Topdog* overcomes, according to Stuelke. It does so by representing the tragic roles that are available to the black characters as precisely nothing other than roles, by representing such appearances as nothing other than constructs. Parks endows her characters with a limited amount of freedom, which allows them to jump between, experiment with, and exchange the tragic roles available to them, as a result of which their ideological underpinnings are suggested. The fact that, despite their negotiations with different cultural constructions of black identity, Booth eventually shoots Lincoln, Stuelke maintains, drives home the institutional and epistemological violence of the tragic narratives with which, in particular, minorities have to contend. She concludes: “By spinning out the tragedy trap’s logic to its violent end, Parks’s play overwhelms its instrumental power [...] forcing the realization that tragedy is both a con and a foregone conclusion from which we ought to detach” (769).

While Stuelke’s interpretation of *Topdog* is extremely insightful and convincing, it is necessary to challenge her final conclusion. I do not regard *Topdog* as a tragedy to escape or find that the play calls for an end to tragedy as such; indeed it represents a highly promising appropriation of tragedy. Stuelke is completely correct that *Topdog* self-reflectively comments on tragic narratives, and that it does so by granting its characters a significantly limited amount of freedom and agency whose very limitations eventually lead to the tragic outcome. Yet, these questions of freedom or agency and their limitations as well as its self-reflexivity significantly align *Topdog* with a tragic tradition rather than marking a distance or difference from it. While ancient Greek tragedy was already a famously self-reflexive genre, in his recent *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*, Simon Critchley places precisely this limited possibility of freedom and agency at the center of tragedy. He maintains:

Tragedy requires some degree of complicity on our part in the disaster that destroys us. It is not simply a question of the malevolent activity of fate, a dark prophecy that flows from the inscrutable but often questionable will of the gods. Tragedy requires our collusion with that fate. In other words, it requires no small measure of freedom. It is in this way that we can understand the tragedy of Oedipus. (Critchley 12–13)

In *The Topdog Diaries*, a documentary that portrays the gestation of Parks’s play from the composition to its Broadway premiere, Parks makes an

intriguing statement that helps pinpoint this same tragic core in her play. She remarks:

Right up through the last seconds of the play, [Lincoln and Booth] can choose how they act. The end of the play comes about not because of some kind of predestined fate but because Lincoln chooses to behave a certain way and Booth chooses to behave a certain way [...] it has hardly anything to do with Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth and everything to do with the two men in the play [...] they had broken free of the historical context (Jacoby 46:45–47:56)

This fascinating comment is followed in the documentary by a short scene from the play. The scene shows the moment just after Booth has lost all of his money to Lincoln and before he shoots his brother. Lincoln, still drunk from the bar, is ecstatic about his victory and condescendingly explains to Booth why he has lost:

you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didn't bother learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. Taadaaaa! It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. (111).

Here, between Parks's and Booth's statements, the problem or question of freedom and its limitations is played out. Just as in the three-card-monte game, in Lincoln and Booth's life, things are not what they seem. It might look like they are just one job opportunity, one paycheck, one lucky break away from a more comfortable life, but this possibility is an illusion that is itself part of the game. As Critchley maintains, the opposition between individual freedom and agency, on the one hand, and a metaphysical principle or force such as fate, on the other, is of central importance in ancient tragedies. In *Topdog*, of course, the metaphysical force in question is not fate but structural racism. Moreover, Abraham Lincoln, who is an ambivalent figure in several of Parks's plays, represents this opposition between freedom and subjection, because the abolition of slavery, which he personifies, often obscures the fact that black people in the U.S. continue to be disadvantaged and dominated in other ways and by other means. Thus, Lincoln—and I refer here neither to the Lincoln in the play nor primarily to the historical Lincoln, but rather to Lincoln as American mythological figure—also represents this insidious illusion of freedom and opportunity so central to *Topdog*. The achievement of Parks's play is that it casts institutional racism as a tragic force without precluding the possibility of change or diminishing the question of responsibility. As

Critchley's statement illustrates, tragedy *also* revolves around the link between freedom and responsibility. Critchley emphasizes Oedipus's complicity in his fate, and Parks's statement in the documentary, if taken in isolation, could open the door to interpretations of Booth and Lincoln as "tragic victims" in accordance with Stuelke's "tragedy trap." Yet, as Stuelke argues, *Topdog* thematizes and problematizes such representations. The tragedy of *Topdog* is that even though Lincoln and Booth try very hard to escape the tragedies that African Americans so often face, they eventually fail. *Topdog* could accordingly be considered a meta-tragedy rather than a straightforward tragedy, but just as metafiction is still fiction, meta-tragedy is still tragedy, and this is important.

*Sweat* by Lynn Nottage was directly inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement and won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2017. In the same year, the *New Yorker* conferred on it the title of "first theatrical landmark of the Trump era" (Schulman). *Sweat* is clearly less experimental than *Topdog* and belongs rather to the realist tradition in drama. It is set in the rust belt, more precisely in Reading, Pennsylvania, and takes place in the years 2000 and 2008. In the first scene, which is set in 2008, the audience encounters Jason and Chris, twenty-nine-year-old men who are on parole. Jason is a white American of German descent and Chris is African American. The play subsequently moves back to the year 2000, and all of the action takes place in a bar, where a group of steel plant workers regularly meets. They discuss rumors that the factory will move jobs abroad to Mexico as a result of the NAFTA agreement as well as a management position for which they can apply. Cynthia, Chris's mother, and Tracey, Jason's mother, actually do apply for the job. Cynthia is successful, and from then onwards, there is a clear tension between Cynthia and the rest. This tension intensifies when, over a weekend, much of the factory machinery is moved away to Mexico and all workers are locked out. The plant wants to renegotiate contracts. Cynthia is caught between the management and her friends, she is forced to lock out her friends, even her son, and she wonders whether she received her management job exactly for this reason (Nottage 77). She has to do the dirty work that nobody else in the management is willing to do. While Cynthia's friends refuse to accept the new terms of employment, they witness how new workers who are willing to work for less enter the factory every day. Of course, they become increasingly angry and desperate. Their frustration becomes unbearable when they learn that Oscar, who waits tables in the bar, has accepted a job at the factory, too, because it pays better than his current work. Eventually, Jason confronts and assaults Oscar in the bar. Chris wants to intervene, but when Oscar

accidentally hits him in the heat of the fight, Chris cannot hold back his anger anymore, either and attacks Oscar together with Jason. Stan, the bartender, tries to defend Oscar against Jason and Chris and sustains a serious head injury as a result. In the end, both Oscar and Stan lie injured on the floor while Chris and Jason flee the scene. This ultimately results in their eight-year imprisonment. At the very end of the play, back in 2008, we see that Oscar has taken over the pub from Stan, who is now waiting tables. Stan is severely disabled because of his head injury. Jason and Chris enter the pub remorsefully but are unable to utter an apology. The final stage directions describe: “The four men, uneasy in their bodies, await the next moment in fractured togetherness” (Nottage 112).

*Sweat* portrays the precarity of the working class, how precarity leads to tensions within the working class itself, and how such conflicts benefit those in power. It cogently illustrates that precarity is coextensive not only with job and financial insecurity but also, importantly, with utter disenfranchisement. In an exuberant review, theater critic Charles Isherwood pinpoints the tragic quality of Nottage’s play as he remarks:

members of the audience might find themselves getting a little moist with anxiety as this extraordinarily moving drama hurtles toward its conclusion with the awful inevitability of Greek tragedy.

Certainly I found myself squirming in my seat as I watched the forces of fate, or, to be more specific, the mechanics of 21st-century American capitalism, bear down on these characters with the brutal power of a jackhammer smashing through concrete. (n.p.)

Similarly to *Topdog*, then, *Sweat* harnesses the power and conventions of tragedy for ideological critique. In several respects, *Sweat* is closely related to *Ruined*, the play for which Nottage won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2009. *Ruined* focuses on the plight of women during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly on the sexual violence to which they are regularly exposed. In the cases of both plays, Nottage collaborated closely with director Kate Whoriskey, and the two of them spent significant time conducting research in the locations in which the plays are set. Moreover, while both plays focus on the predicaments of a distinct, oppressed group of people, the explicit aim of both was to raise social awareness and mobilize political activism. They try to achieve this by directly appealing to the audience’s emotions, and hence they are both informed by a realist aesthetics. Nottage and Whoriskey developed this aesthetic strategy while working on *Ruined*, as they initially envisaged *Ruined* as a modern adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage* (Whoriskey xi/xii). In an interview with Jean E. Howard, Nottage describes *Ruined* as

tragedy, but she adds that critics frequently do not respond particularly well to tragedy and instead tend to think of plays that “[deal] with weightier, emotional material” as melodrama.

While the realist aesthetics and its focus on social class clearly distinguish *Sweat* from *Topdog*, it is interesting to notice similarities between the two plays, particularly with respect to the relationship between precarity and tragedy. Like the murder at the end of *Topdog*, Jason and Chris’s attack on Oscar and Stan can be considered tragic, not only in a vulgar but also in a more literary sense. Analogously to Parks’s argument regarding the characters of Booth and Lincoln, one could maintain that *Sweat* did not have to end this way. Jason and Chris did not have to attack Oscar and Stan, and yet they did. Thus, at issue is once again the opposition between individual freedom and choice, on the one hand, and a metaphysical force, such as fate (in ancient tragedies), institutional racism (in *Topdog*), or the systematic oppression of the working class (in *Sweat*), on the other hand. Chris and Jason are imprisoned because they made a mistake and are clearly guilty. However, the tragedy is, just as in *Topdog*, that there are a lot of contributing factors that lead to this outcome and that Chris and Jason’s attack cannot be explained exclusively, arguably not even chiefly, with character flaws. This opposition between individual freedom and the systematic exploitation of the working class can be observed well in Cynthia’s case. Cynthia applies for the management position and is successful. Thus, it looks initially as if she had succeeded in improving her situation entirely by herself. She must have been the best applicant and must have deserved the promotion. Cynthia becomes the living proof that upward mobility is still possible. Yet, her promotion tellingly transforms her into a figure akin to a messenger in a classical tragedy, for she suddenly has to mediate between her working-class friends and the management, to which she somehow still does not properly belong. And of course, it is no coincidence that the management in *Sweat* is as absent from the stage as the gods usually are in ancient tragedies. So, even though Cynthia’s promotion at first looks like the fruit of her own labor, the result of her own actions, and thus eventually like proof of her individual freedom, this is not the case. For good reasons, Cynthia starts wondering whether she only received the management position to facilitate the renegotiations of the working contracts. Thus, in the end, the metaphysical force prevails over individual freedom, or, as Lincoln explains to Booth: “It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you” (Parks 111). Similarly to Oedipus’s belief in his ability to change his fate, the promise of a better life drives the characters in *Topdog* and

*Sweat*, and it prevents them from rebelling openly against a repressive, exploitative system. Importantly, *Topdog* and *Sweat* do not contrive this tragic logic, according to which the characters become complicit in their own undoing by choosing to act against their interests. It is already at work in neoliberalism, and it has famously been examined by Lauren Berlant under the name of “cruel optimism.” Berlant explains:

an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. [...] optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expanse transformation for which a person or a people risks striving. (2)

The idea of upward mobility is one of the examples of cruel optimism that Berlant discusses at length. Hence, not only do contemporary plays like *Topdog* and *Sweat* have to be regarded as tragedies, but they bring to the fore a tragic structure or logic that is at work in neoliberal society itself.

*Topdog* and *Sweat* challenge this tragic logic of neoliberalism—the tragedy of being-precarious—by framing it as tragic theater. Hence, it is crucial that they be considered tragedies. Challenging a narrative or genre from within—appropriating it, stretching its limitations—is significantly more promising than opposing it from the outside, particularly in the case of as entrenched, old, and protean a notion as “tragedy.” Opposing tragedy or trying to escape or avoid tragedy only risks reinforcing its power by defining a genre, narrative, or tradition negatively, as what it emphatically is *not*. Moreover, by arguing that *Topdog* transcends tragedy and thus by positioning characters like Lincoln and Booth outside its realm, a progressive critical position like Stuelke’s might inadvertently reinforce the conservative, formalist view of tragedy that considers lower class and ethnic minority characters unworthy of the genre.

While scholars such as Hall, Goldhill, and Williams maintain that narrow, formal definitions of tragedy are modern inventions, Goldhill and Williams also discuss the political implications of this terminological development and emphasize the importance of more inclusive conceptions. Here is Goldhill:

There is a repeated pattern of rhetoric in claims to recognize the truly tragic. It usually starts with a rather easy commonplace: dismissing the modern journalistic love of the term “tragic” as trivialization, used as it is for any upsetting event from the broken bone in a footballer’s foot to the natural disaster of a tsunami. This critical rejection of the journalist’s promiscuous recognition of tragedy is part and parcel of an attempt to reserve the vocabulary

of “the tragic” not just to denote the grandest genre of the Western theatrical tradition, but also to describe and to privilege a particular sense of the human condition: a suffering that sets man against the otherness of the world [...]. Generalizing about the tragic is one strategy for introducing a hierarchy into perceptions of human suffering—downplaying your mundane misery in the name of my truly tragic. (141)

Thus, Goldhill considers the vernacular use of tragedy as opposed to the philosophical and literary uses. Referring to a “particular sense of the human condition,” the philosophical idea of the tragic also influences modern literary definitions of tragedy insofar as not all kinds of human suffering and, importantly, not all kinds of human beings are recognized as equally representative. Schematically, precariousness is readily viewed as “truly tragic,” while precarity falls into the category of “mundane misery.” Accordingly, if plays such as *Topdog* and *Sweat* are not considered tragedies, this is also because the lives of their characters are deemed to embody and thus represent the “human condition” only imperfectly, which means that they are viewed as somehow less-than-human. Among other things, this also implies that the lives of the characters lost or fundamentally changed in those plays are not as grievable as the lives of other, “more tragic” characters. The politics of grief or mourning is intimately related to the question of who or what counts as human, and it is accordingly not surprising that mourning is not only historically connected to the genre of tragedy but also plays an important role in Butler’s work on precarity/precariousness. Grief is a difficult emotion, Butler explains, because it makes us aware of the extent to which our lives depend on others and it thus “challenges the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (*Precarious Life* 23). Butler’s discourse on precariousness and the German Idealists’ discourse on the tragic here significantly overlap.

In *Modern Tragedy*, Williams approaches the same issue as Goldhill from a different but equally illuminating perspective. Likewise reflecting on the tensions between the vulgar understanding of tragedy and the academic uses, he concludes: “Tragedy, we are told, is not simply death and suffering, and it is certainly not accident” (Williams 14). The opposition between tragedy and “accident” introduced here is significant. Certain sad or disturbing events—Williams mentions “a mining disaster, a burned-out family, a broken career, a smash on the road” (13–14)—are not normally considered tragedies, Williams argues, because they tend to be described as “accidents.” In contrast to “tragedy,” which imbues events with metaphysical significance, “accident” implies that whatever happened, no matter how sad, is merely the result of unfortunate circumstances.



Hence, Williams maintains: “we can see that the ordinary academic tradition of tragedy is in fact an ideology” (48). He further explains:

The real key, to the modern separation of tragedy from “mere suffering”, is the separation of ethical control and, more critically, human agency, from our understanding of social and political life.

[...] The events which are not seen as tragic are deep in the pattern of our own culture: war, famine, work, traffic, politics. To see no ethical content or human agency in such events, or to say that we cannot connect them with general meanings, and especially with permanent and universal meanings, is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide. (48–49)

To consider or describe an event as “accident” instead of as “tragedy” implies that not much could have been done to prevent it. On the one hand, it thus amounts to a rejection of responsibility of those in power and the pre-emption of the possibility of change. On the other hand, it undermines the human agency of the victims—the freedom and ability to effect change and make decisions that Parks emphasizes with regard to Lincoln and Booth—who consequently lose some of their humanity by being reduced to passive victims. Thus, the opposition between “tragedy” and “accident” returns us once again to the concepts of “freedom” and the “human condition” or to the question of what or who precisely counts as human. Granted, it would be strange to describe Booth’s murder or Jason and Chris’s attack as accidents, but it is entirely plausible that such events are describes as “incidents” rather than tragedies. “Accident” and “incident” share the etymological root of *cadere*, which means “to fall.” This is the fall of the dice, the work of chance, and chance rather than a grand metaphysical design is thus implied in both “accident” and “incident.”

### Conclusion: The Importance and Power of Tragedy Today

At stake in Goldhill’s and Williams’s criticisms of the narrow, academic uses of “tragedy” and in the present interpretations of *Topdog* and *Sweat* as tragedies is the expansion—in fact the democratization—of “tragic” suffering to include in it the “mundane misery” (Goldhill) or the “mere suffering” (Williams) of ordinary people, to which precarity belongs as well. If the genre of tragedy is related to metaphysical insights about the human condition, that is to precariousness, and if plays like *Sweat* or *Topdog* are not considered tragedies because their subject matter is too

“mundane,” the continuity between precarity and precariousness is obscured, and a central political and philosophical dimension of contemporary plays (contemporary tragedies) is lost. Hence, to appreciate the political potential of tragedies like *Topdog* and *Sweat*, it is necessary to return to Lorey’s argument, according to which precarity results from the unequal distribution of precariousness. At the same time, an ostensible conflict between Stuelke’s and Williams’s assessments of tragedy needs to be addressed. Stuelke condemns Obama’s description of Martin’s death as tragedy because it represents this death as the work of fate rather than the consequence of systemic racism and thus amounts to a rejection of accountability. Williams, by contrast, maintains that common calamities are often described as “accidents” rather than tragedies and that this amounts to a preclusion of the possibility of change and agency. According to Stuelke, the label of tragedy is undesirable; according to Williams, tragedy needs to be reclaimed. What this tension between Stuelke’s and Williams’s positions primarily reveals is that tragedy is a fundamentally complex and ambivalent genre, concerned as it is, for instance, both with the possibilities *and* limitations of the human condition, particularly of freedom. Accordingly, the difference between Stuelke’s and Williams’s conceptions of tragedy is one of emphasis or perspective; Stuelke focuses on the limitations of freedom and the rejection of responsibility, Williams on the possibilities of the former and the assumption of the latter. Being aware of this essential ambivalence of tragedy and thinking of it in relative terms (as a case of “both and”) instead of in absolute ones (as “either or”) opens the possibility of engaging with this potentially powerful genre in ways that encourage politically progressive interpretations rather than reactionary ones. That is, it allows for egalitarian approaches to tragedy that mobilize the intimate relationships between precarity, precariousness, tragedy, and the tragic to draw attention to the continuity between precarity and precariousness.

Indeed, on the basis of this insight, precarity and precariousness, on the one hand, and tragedy and the tragic, on the other, can be tied together in one last knot. The ambivalence at the center of tragedy, according to which tragedy can enable or forestall social and political change, is analogous to the ambivalence of the relationship between precarity and precariousness, which, according to Butler and Lorey, are both distinct and yet fundamentally related. While the appreciation of the connections between precarity and precariousness could lead to social and political reform, the strict separation of these two notions runs the risk of precluding it. In her recent book *Tragedy Since 9/11*, Jennifer Wallace reflects on the relationships between tragedy, precariousness, and *catharsis*

in a way that beautifully illustrates these connections. *Catharsis*, this most tragic of all concepts, commonly associated with the emotions of pity *and* fear, not pity *or* fear, of course, perfectly captures the ambivalence of tragedy, as well. Wallace argues:

Watching tragedy raises important questions about what is the appropriate response to the suffering of others and who is entitled to express it. [...] Tragedy, by opening us up to a recognition of the precarious situation of others, [...] produces bonds of interdependence and reciprocity. [...] Tragic recognition entails a reciprocal process of understanding, sharing in each other's vulnerability and limitedness. [...] Besides pity, of course, there is also fear, the other emotion identified by Aristotle as central to tragedy. [...] tragedies can have a positive moral effect, jolting those experiencing them, including the bystanders and witnesses, into opening themselves up into a richer imagination of the lives of others. But fear can overwhelm pity, close down our capacity for compassion and encourage us to respond to the threat of assimilation by creating greater distance and distinction than was originally there. (9–11)

*Catharsis* can elicit compassion and solidarity, or it can result in emotional distance and in more extreme cases even in hostility and violence. Furthermore, while precariousness and precarity are intricately connected, ontological or existential precariousness is a condition that all human beings share, while precarity is more particular, since some people lead more precarious lives than others. Now, it is important to democratize tragedy, to consider plays like *Topdog* and *Sweat* as tragedies, to admit precarity to the realm of the tragic because the exclusion of representations of precarity and of suffering related to precarity from the category of the tragic amounts to a distancing gesture that strictly separates precarity from precariousness and casts people affected by precarity in the role of the other. If precarity and precariousness are thus separated, the fates of human beings and literary characters affected by precarity do not need to concern the privileged observer. “I” (who can afford a ticket to the Broadway performance of *Topdog* or *Sweat*) can watch Lincoln and Booth, or Jason and Chris and tell “myself” that the events that unfold in front of “me” are exclusively their problem, that they have nothing to do with “me.” However, if the connections between precarity and precariousness are acknowledged, and this happens when precarity is included in the tragic, the precarity of others is likely to remind the observer of the precariousness that all human beings share. “I” recognize in the precarity of the lives represented by Booth, Lincoln, Jason, and Chris the precariousness that makes us all human.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their helpful and encouraging feedback. In particular, I would like to thank them for drawing my attention to Patricia Stuelke's essay, which allowed me to develop an even stronger and more nuanced argument.

## References

- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009.
- . *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Colbert, Soyica Diggs. “Suzan-Lori Parks (1963–)”. *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama: From O’Neill to the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. David Palmer. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018. 199–212.
- Critchley, Simon. *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2019.
- During, Simon. “From the Subaltern to the Precariat.” *Boundary 2* 42.2 (2015): 57–84.
- Felski, Rita. “Introduction.” *Rethinking Tragedy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Goldhill, Simon. *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Hall, Edith. “To Fall from High or Low Estate? Tragedy and Social Class in Historical Perspective.” *PMLA* 129.4 (2014): 773–82.
- Howard, Jean E. “Interview with Lynn Nottage.” *PMLA* 129.4 (2014): 847–49.
- Isherwood, Charles. “Review: Lynn Nottage’s ‘Sweat’ Examines Lives Unraveling by Industry’s Demise.” *New York Times* 16 August 2015.
- Jacoby, Oren. *The Topdog Diaries: An Intimate Portrait of Suzan-Lori Parks*. Image Entertainment, 2002.
- Kolin, Philip C. and Harvey Young. “‘Watch Me Work’: Reflections on Suzan-Lori Parks and her Canon.” *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 1–25.
- Lemke, Sieglinde. *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Lorey, Isabell. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London: Verso, 2015.
- Nottage, Lynn. *Sweat*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2017.
- Parks, Suzan-Lori. *Topdog/Underdog*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2002.
- Schulman, Michael. “The First Theatrical Landmark of the Trump Era.” *The New Yorker* 20 March 2017.
- Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Steiner, George. *The Death of Tragedy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1961.

- Stuelke, Patricia. "Trayvon Martin, *Topdog/Underdog*, and the Tragedy Trap." *American Literary History* 29.4 (2017): 753–778.
- Wallace, Jennifer. *Tragedy Since 9/11: Reading a World out of Joint*. London a.o.p.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
- Whoriskey, Kate. "Introduction." *Ruined*. By Lynn Nottage. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009. ix–xiii.
- Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. London: Verso, 1979.

