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Precarious foodscapes: life, caring, digitization, and labor in the face of deepening food crises

Abstract:

In the face of deepening environmental and economic crises, the concept of precarity helps to draw out the grave problems that permeate contemporary foodscapes. In this special issue introduction, we lay the conceptual groundwork for connecting the concept of precarity with contemporary foodscapes by identifying four key sources of precarity within precarious foodscapes: life, caring, digitization, and labor. Life becomes a source of shared precarity with human and non-human life in the face of a destabilizing climactic and health ecologies. Caring becomes a source of precarity as food becomes intertwined with gendered food work and emotional labor. Digital information technologies become a source of precarity as discourses and ideas of food become destabilized and recreated by digital platforms, algorithms, and technologies. Labor becomes a source of precarity as the corporate food regime deepens its exploitation of compensated human labor, unpaid human labor, and non-human labor. This discussion contextualizes the articles that follow and aims to open up and invite further research on precarious foodscapes going forward.

Keywords: Precarious foodscapes; insecurity; vulnerability; digitization; caring; food

Introduction

In 2019, we organized a session on the theme of “geographies of food in our precarious present” at the Association of American Geographers Annual Conference that provided the impetus for this special issue. Before the session, we sought to arrange a lunch meet-up, but most of the restaurants in Washington D.C.’s affluent Wardman Park neighborhood easily cost \$30 including tips, and that meant some participants might not feel welcome. The cheapest restaurant option was McDonald’s, one we did not even consider. Instead of picking a restaurant, we decided to meet in a conference room at the hotel during lunch break. The plan worked out well; presenters brought whatever food they could find and dropped by for as much time as they had to spare. Although a common enough occurrence at academic conferences, this gathering stuck with us, because of how the very precarious foodscapes that we sought to study shaped our ability to connect with other scholars who study precarious food. Precarity is all around us these days not just as an abstract topic of research but as something that many scholars have viscerally experienced (Hughes 2021; Thorkelson 2016; Zielke, Thompson, and Hepburn 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has since introduced a whole new set of issues related to precarious foodscapes. Food has an important role as a source of sustenance and conviviality that fosters social connections. But the COVID-19 pandemic has implicated this source of social bonding with the threat of disease transmission, because eating is considered a high-risk setting for

SARS-CoV2 transmission. The pandemic inflicted a severe downturn on the dining industry as many restaurants permanently closed and workers were laid off. For customers, showing their support for local restaurants is fraught with risk to health and social judgments alike. The COVID-19 pandemic also makes preexisting issues that directly relate to the pandemic more dire. In the US, for example, migrant farmworkers have long endured precarity through poor pay and protections (Holmes and Bourgois 2013). With the coronavirus, these workers now face the additional risk of facing exposure to COVID-19 without health care benefits. Food access is another already dire problem that the pandemic makes worse although it spreads unequally among groups that are too often overlooked in popular discourses (Alkon et al. 2020).

In the Anthropocene, our current geological epoch of environmental crisis, food systems have both contributed to, and are threatened by, the irreversible tipping points we approach. Against the mounting threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, water shortages, and eroding soil quality, global food systems are acutely exposed. Global networks of food production and supply that rely heavily on imports and just-in-time models have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to external shocks (McMichael 2009). The empty supermarket shelves in early 2020 as COVID-19 interrupted supply chains across the globe demonstrated the deep vulnerabilities of neoliberal food security (Clapp and Moseley 2020). Environmental and technological pressures, alongside moral and ethical debates around contemporary food consumption practices, unsettle long-held assumptions of what constitutes responsible farming and food in the face of these rapid changes.

While the quality turn was prominent in the 2000s and the moral and ethical turn in the 2010s (D. Goodman 2003; Goodman, Maye, and Holloway 2010), recent scholarship and developments like COVID-19 indicate that precarity will be an important concept within the study of food in the 2020s. Precarity has been employed widely in critical scholarship to examine complex power relations within neoliberal governance across a diverse set of contexts and scales. In this introduction we argue that precarity has much to offer those studying food and set out key areas where precarity offers fruitful grounds of enquiry. In doing so we introduce precarious foodscapes as a lens through which the multi-scalar fragilities embedded and experienced within contemporary foodscapes are revealed and understood.

We draw attention to four key sources of precarity within contemporary foodscapes: life, caring, digitization, and labor. This introduction and the papers in this special issue employ a geographical orientation that explores how these different aspects of precarity are related, expressed in situated places, and connected with larger dynamics reshaping contemporary foodscapes. The concept of precarity has been critiqued for hiding a conservative politics that seeks to recapture a more stable past (Berlant 2011; Millar 2017; Thorkelson 2016). In light of this critique, our conceptual framework for precarious foodscapes seeks to reveal the present dynamics shaping contemporary foodscapes, but this use of precarity does not signal a defensive retreat to or glorification of the stability of historical foodscapes. Instead, we maintain that the concept of precarious foodscapes helps to illuminate the daunting political and environmental challenges we face, challenges that need to be faced head-on and with solutions that adopt the lessons of the past to our present and future conditions.

Our introduction has two aims. First, we seek to lay the conceptual groundwork for connecting the concept of precarity with contemporary foodscapes by identifying four key aspects

of precarious foodscapes: precarious life, precarious caring, precarious digitization, and precarious labor. Second, we contextualize and introduce the papers for this special themed issue.

Precarious foodscapes

Precarity often appears in scholarly writing as a synonym for insecurity and vulnerability. In one prominent example, anthropologist Tsing (2015) delves into the tangled foodscape of matsutake mushrooms to explore the construction of market and other values within our precarious times. She writes,

Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious — even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined. In contrast to the mid-twentieth century, when poets and philosophers of the global north felt caged by too much stability, now many of us, north and south, confront the condition of trouble without end. (Tsing 2015, 2)

This description of precarity gets at the general feeling of unease that accompanies geological, technological, and economic shifts. In geologic terms, the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene threatens the stability of ecosystems with a direct impact on the viability of agricultural production and dependent food provisioning systems.

Although some aspects of our precarious present are novel, such as the climate crisis, others are just novel to the global North. Munck (2013) traces the genealogy of precarity from earlier debates on marginality in 1960s Latin America, informality in 1970s Africa, and social exclusion in 1980s Europe. Munck (2013, 752) argues that “the type of work described by the term ‘precarity’ has always been the norm in the global South. In fact, it is Fordism and the welfare state which is the exception to the rule from a global perspective.” This critique of the concept of precarity cautions against assuming the perspective of the global North. Despite the orientation of precarity toward the Global North, numerous scholars have productively used the concept of precarity to explore unstable work and the condition of fragile life in the Global South (e.g., Das 2015; Millar 2014).

In an excellent critical review of the concept of precarity, Millar (2017) questions what is new about the concept of precarity and what it references. In pursuing this line of inquiry, Millar (2017, 2) identifies three influential approaches to precarity: for Bourdieu (1998) it is a labor condition, for Standing (2011) a class identity, and for Butler (2004) an ontological experience. For Butler (2004) precarity as an ontology expresses the shared vulnerability of life. In later discussions, Butler distinguishes between exposure to social vulnerability (precariousness), the inequality of this precarious scholarship may reinforce the conservative ideal of stable wage-labor employment (see also Berlant 2011; Thorkelson 2016).

These criticisms of conservative ideas related to precarity resemble criticisms of conservative tendencies within alternative food networks. For example, Winter (2003) highlights how mobilization around local food leads to defensive localism. In a related study, Kloppenburg and Hassanein (2006) criticize capitalist approaches to alternative agriculture for impeding more radical possibilities. A burgeoning area of food research draws on Gibson-Graham (2008) to examine the growth of diverse economies of food that enable non-capitalist forms of economic

exchange (Cameron and Wright 2014; Sarmiento 2017). Still, some diverse economies also face contradictions such as the undervaluing of farm labor and the threat of cooptation (Suryanata, Mostafanezhad, and Milne 2021). The concept of precarity helps to draw out deeply rooted problems facing contemporary foodscapes, but precarity does not provide an easy solution given the wide-ranging environmental and social problems we face. Precarious foodscapes operate at multiple scales, on the one extreme highlighting global environmental and economic processes but on the other providing new insights into intimate spaces and embodied experiences.

Foodscapes is a concept widely used in the research of food that emerged mainly from the fields of geography and sociology to examine the practices, meanings, materials, and discourses that mediate food environments (MacKendrick 2014). In a special issue for this journal, Johnston and Goodman (2015) introduce the concept of “spectacular foodscapes” to explore the impacts of food celebrities. Goodman has also productively used the concept of foodscapes to explore ethical foodscapes, relational foodscapes, and digital foodscapes (M. K. Goodman 2016; M. K. Goodman and Jaworska 2020; M. K. Goodman, Maye, and Holloway 2010). These articles make clear that foodscape is a supple concept for analyzing important shifts within food environments, and this introduction develops the idea of precarious foodscapes. In the ensuing sections, we develop a set of four related areas that are key to the emergence of precarious foodscapes.

Precarious life

Butler’s (2004) conception of precarious life introduces a radical ontology for relational connection between humans through their shared vulnerability. Although foodscapes still prioritize the role of humans, the concept of foodscapes requires moving beyond social relations to also consider non-human life and ecological relations. In writing about the lively ecologies of artisan raw cheese-makers, Paxson (2008) develops the notion of a post-Pasteurian approach to explain the growing numbers of people who recognize there are beneficial bacteria that boost human health in contrast to a Pasteurian approach that seeks to sterilize all bacteria in the name of food safety. Building on Paxson, Lorimer (2020) proposes a “probiotic turn” as part of a broader shift in the management of life that seeks to utilize ecological thinking to manage a broad range of ecologies from an individual human’s microbiomes to the use of rewilding strategies in environmental management. Lorimer explains:

The probiotic turn is happening at a contemporary juncture in which common anxieties about ecological dependency, dysbiosis, and precarity profoundly challenge modern approaches to health and environmental management, animate a range of ecomodernist and reactionary alternatives, and prompt a far-reaching consideration of the futures of progress, prosperity, and multispecies survival. (Lorimer 2020, 14)

Precarious life emerges through ruptures at the site of multiple transitions; the transition from antibiotic to probiotic approaches, from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, from the exclusion of others to a recognition of shared vulnerability, and from an anthropocentric preoccupation with humans to a multispecies recognition of ecological interconnections.

In the context of these vast ruptures, individuals experience precarious life through situated experiences and encounters with precarity. The climate crisis is threatening the continuation of traditional agricultural techniques. Even for techniques that are still effective, farms across the

world increasingly face pressures arising from the corporate financialization of agriculture and land speculation. Small-scale and peasant agriculture faces significant pressure from neoliberal capitalism (Ploeg 2008). Much of the world's population still relies on agricultural production for food or as their main source of income. In wealthy countries, workers in agricultural and animal industries are also exploited and face various threats to their bodies including stress injuries and increased exposure to dangerous chemicals and bacteria (Blanchette 2015; Holmes and Bourgois 2013; Lavau 2017).

People who do not produce but just consume food also find themselves more exposed to precarity. Along with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the hunger and a dearth of access to food has increased along the lines of preexisting inequalities. This is the most obvious expression of precarious foodscapes. Aside from the pandemic, people must make sense of and navigate increasingly complex industrial food provisioning systems, the latest food scares, and unfamiliar but supposedly sustainable foods (Jackson 2015; Sexton 2018). Consumers face precarity through a range of pressures, expectations, and uncertainties that accompany everyday food practices. One of the most fundamental of these sources of precarity is that as ideas of healthy food have changed to encompass organic, agroecological, and probiotic characteristics, consumers face conflicting messages about what foods they should eat. Raw milk, for example, invokes ideas of local and fresh food that many consumers assume is healthier than typical industrial fare (Enticott 2003). Aside from health concerns, consumers face a range of ethical pressures that are now connected with everyday decisions such as whether to buy free trade products (Barnett et al. 2011). Food justice has become a key concept for guiding research that examines the relationship between food and inequalities that emerge from numerous sources of inequality including racial, economic, and environmental lines (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Along with the growing emphasis on food justice, consumers are often implored to care more about their food, but caring itself can become another source of precarity.

Precarious caring

Food and care have long been closely entwined. The way that we eat, cook, and shop allows us to care at multiple scales; for our individual bodies, for our family and friends as a social relation, and for those who produce our food. In times of crisis the burden for care increasingly falls on individuals who are disproportionately female and mothers (Wilson and Yochim 2017). In sketching out care as a key source of precarity, we focus on both systemic conditions and on individual's embodied experiences. As the state rolls back welfare programs, the burden for care requires non-state interventions or is thrust onto individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed deep cracks in state food assistance programs across the developed world, with the responses of many governments woefully inadequate in ensuring citizens have access to enough nutritious, affordable food. In the UK the closure of schools during national lockdowns has triggered a crisis as vulnerable children have been left without access to free school meals programs as the government floundered to deliver an adequate alternative. In January 2021 photos of paltry emergency food parcels were shared by parents on social media and revealed the shortcomings of state supplied meals (Elgot, Weale, and Butler 2021). Patchwork responses by food banks, local businesses, supermarkets, charities and religious groups highlight both the systemic failings to meet everyday food needs and the complex assemblages of public-

private actors involved in providing emergency food. Precarity is encountered for parents experiencing food poverty who struggle to feed their children, or in compromising their own food needs in skipping meals to ensure their kids can eat, experienced within everyday caring food spaces and practices.

For those living precariously, difficult decisions around what and how to eat demand physical and emotional care work (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Such work is distinctly gendered, with the majority of caring work connected to food falling to women and mothers, intersecting with dynamics of class, race and sexuality (Fox and Smith 2011; Parsons 2017). Mothers face additional societal pressures to prepare healthy and ethical food for their children, but these obligations are ambiguous and difficult to fulfill given limited resources of time, money, and care (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2019; Cairns and Johnston 2018; Cairns, Johnston, and Mackendrick 2013; MacKendrick and Stevens 2016). Precarious caring can involve multiple strategies to weather a crisis and keep enough food on the family table such as couponing, budgeting, flexible paid employment, and sharing childcare with other mothers. These forms of work can help improve family resilience but involve unacknowledged and unpaid work, coming at the expense of women's free time and relationships outside the home (Wilson and Yochim 2015).

Alongside these acute experiences of precarity, we also reflect on the broader demands that we “care more” about food, its production, environmental and health impacts, as well as what we eat (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Closely connected to work around alternative food systems and ethical consumption, consuming “good food” (however defined) becomes a performative act of care, signaling both acts of care and our ethical and moral value, made explicitly performative through representations in food media (M. K. Goodman, Maye, and Holloway 2010; Johnston and Goodman 2015). Such performative care practices have given renewed focus to narratives around gender and class in relation to food and cooking, particularly as they intersect with food media (Hollows 2003). As Signe Rousseau (2015, 45) argues, sharing on social media has become “shorthand for caring about what you eat.” In the digital age, posting about food signals that we care – and care in the right ways – about food.

Precarious digitization

The digitalization of food shapes the interactions people have with food and food knowledge, altering how we eat, share, negotiate and contest relations with food in fundamental ways. Though food and our relations to it have always been contested, the increasing digitization of food creates both new and more diverse opportunities for food representation, consumption practices, food relations, information sharing, participation and activism (Rowe and Grady 2020). While digital technology impacts the growth, processing and supply of food across agri-food systems (Prause, Hackfort, and Lindgren 2020), we are particularly interested in what Lupton has termed “digital food cultures” the:

“representations and practices related to food across a variety of digital media: blogs and vlogs (video blogs), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, technology developers’ promotional media, online discussion forums, and self-tracking apps and devices” (Lupton 2020, 2)

Digital platforms mediate, curate and shape the negotiated and contested meanings around food, while algorithm-driven internet platforms increasingly shape the information available to eaters,

consumer expectations, and the accessibility of food types. These digital spaces are significant because they construct our online food experiences while creating new frontiers for food capitalism (M. K. Goodman and Jaworska 2020).

In this section we discuss digital food as a source of precarity. Precarious digitization – precarity as experienced, overcome and rendered invisible through digital information technologies – considers critically the curation of digital food discourses and the practices established and normalized through digital foodscapes. Digital foodscapes blur the boundaries between online and offline, dependent on a material infrastructure of digital technologies and platforms to produce food content yet are always anchored and experienced in real world places. As Goodman, Johnston, and Cairns (2017, 161) argue, digital foodscapes are significant because “food media and the mediatized foodscapes that co-produce them are situated not just at the center of (food) capitalist assemblages but, more specifically, in the very biopolitics of everyday life.” The circulation of “good food” images and texts are not mere entertainment but should be understood as explicit interventions that seek to change what and how we eat, with very real bodily, cultural, environmental, and political impacts. The promises of food media to make us “better” in some way has a strong draw and has rapidly expanded, the impacts of which are only just beginning to be understood by critical food scholars (M. K. Goodman, Johnston, and Cairns 2017; Lupton 2020; Rousseau 2012).

Within digital food we see precarity in three interrelated areas: the production of digital food knowledge; digital food creative work and labor; and in the disjuncture between online representations and the real world. Democratization of access and production in digital food media has transformed the food media landscape, reconfiguring the power relations within traditional print and broadcast media in fundamental ways. Social media platforms allow individuals to operate as “prosumers”, simultaneously producing and consuming digital food content that is increasingly user-generated (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). While this may open up creative opportunities and challenge the distinctions between amateur and professional media spheres, it has also given rise to precarious configurations of labor where securing paid employment relies on performative entrepreneurial strategies of branding and self-promotion in order to maintain a large audience and position as influencer. For those chasing the influencer life, unpaid labor becomes normalized and new patterns of work have to fit around other paid or domestic commitments (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Wilson and Yochim 2015).

The rise of digital food prosumers also raises critical questions around expertise, legitimacy, and authenticity, particularly where claims about health and nutrition are involved. Authenticity is understood as a key characteristic of digital foodscapes, used by individual influencers to navigate the boundaries between public and private space in ways that are deeply performative (M. K. Goodman and Jaworska 2020). Tension exists between the visibility needed for digital success and the demands to be “real” in digital content and are experienced in gendered ways that women and marginalized genders are particularly vulnerable too, conforming to gendered social norms in order to ensure and maintain digital audiences and financial success (Duffy and Hund 2019). Moreover, authenticity in digital influencer performance can sit in tension with accurate and expert food knowledges as highlighted by the clean eating trend. Digital foodscapes are revealed as a source of precarity through clean eating narratives in both inaccurate diet and nutrition information, and through the narrow range of bodies represented, that are disproportionately young, white, slim,

female and able bodied (M. K. Goodman and Jaworska 2020). The performative circulation of problematic and inaccurate information by non-expert voices reveals precarity in digital food discourses, and the damaging impacts on our relationships with food that it can encourage (Tandoh 2016).

Precarious labor

Before turning to labor specifically, it is worth situating contemporary disruptions to labor within the changing political economy of the corporate food regime. Writing of the “precariat” as a new class identity, Standing (2011) emphasizes the increasing precarity of labor that arises from the intersection of deepening economic globalization, corporate emphasis on labor flexibility, and neoliberal austerity. This analysis draws a useful link between precarity and neoliberalism. Food regime analysis makes a broad connection with current economic trends and the environmental and social crises that emerge from a corporate food regime that is orchestrated by financialized neoliberalism (Clapp and Moseley 2020; McMichael 2009). Precarity draws attention to the structural insecurity that arises within the corporate food regime (Harvey 2018; Stensrud 2019).

In developing the application of precarious labor as a particular type of relation within foodscapes, we distinguish between financially compensated human labor, unpaid human labor, and non-human labor. The first, paid human labor, is the most prominent. In the Global South, precarious work has been the norm not the exception (Munck 2013). In the Global North as well, agriculture and food-related wage labor has historically consisted of a disproportionate number of undesirable and low-paying jobs, especially for migrant and undocumented workers (Harrison 2011; Holmes and Bourgois 2013; Striffler 2005). Precarious work has expanded alongside the shrinking of stable employment opportunities that cause people to increasingly sell their labor through the gig economy. A prominent example of the gig economy are online platforms such as UberEats that run on algorithms (Wood et al. 2019). Instead of restaurants hiring employees to deliver food, tech platforms will, for a fee, orchestrate precarious workers to deliver food from a restaurant to a consumer (Bissell 2020). A key dynamic that emerges under advanced neoliberalism is that workers find that they have less time to spend on unpaid labor such as buying and cooking food. As time for unpaid labor decreases, this gap can be filled through the paid labor of other precarious workers.

Unpaid labor intersects with the previous discussions of precarious caring and precarious digitization. Even the seeming winners of the economy with stable employment, especially if they are mothers, face increased pressure to feed their children the right kinds of food (Bowen, Brenton, and Elliott 2019; Cairns, Johnston, and Mackendrick 2013). They also face pressure to share the right kind of food images and ideas on social media (Wilson and Loachim 2017, M. K. Goodman and Jaworska 2020). As a result, foodscapes grow increasingly fraught and freighted with social anxiety (Abbots and Coles 2013; Jackson 2015). Given the increasing complexity of food systems and proliferation of information about the safety and ethics of food, an individual’s ability to make sense of the health and ethical implications becomes yet another source of unpaid labor that arises within precarious foodscapes.

In the discussion of precarious life, we asserted that the concept of foodscapes requires us to consider the role of non-human life, and here, too, we see it as necessary to consider the role of non-human labor. The concept of alternative food networks initiated deeper awareness of the

countless human and non-human actors that are enlisted in foodscapes (Whatmore and Lorraine 1997). As the corporate food regime deepens the industrialization of animal industries, animal genetics are manipulated to produce more animal flesh in less time (Coles 2016; Twine 2010). This exploitation of animal life occurs alongside the exploitation of precarious workers (Blanchette 2015; Striffler 2005). Such farming conditions leads to increased risk for the emergence of novel diseases such as highly pathogenic avian influenza (Wallace 2009). In addition, animal industries are a major driver of land use change and the climate crisis (Weis 2013). Rather than viewing animal lives as a cog in the production of food, the idea of non-human labor draws attention to relations between life in the Anthropocene and the shared problems that we face, a notion that Moore (2015) refers to as the “web of life.” This discussion of precarious labor reveals the depressing trends for labor that are pronounced within advanced neoliberalism. There are, however, several strategies that scholars have identified for escaping these exploitative relations. Ideas such as alternative food networks, diverse economies of food, food justice, and multispecies thinking point toward the approaches that could make food systems more regenerative for all the life and labor that it enfold.

On the articles in this special issue

Each of the articles in this special issue delves into a distinct aspect of precarious foodscapes. Stewart’s article draws on survey and interview data of Irish family farms to deepen our understanding of how their precaritization emerges from broader global and national assemblages of political-economic power relations. He highlights the processes that normalize precarity as labor condition for Irish family farmers and cautions that such precariousness is expanding within the global food system. Frith’s article considers charitable organizations started by celebrity chefs and restaurants in New Orleans, arguing that their position within the fabric of post-disaster food-aid response not only signals failings in government disaster response but introduces a new type of “precarious reliance on caring individuals and non-governmental entities.” Schrager’s article utilizes a case study of everyday discourses and practices surrounding chicken meat in Japan to examine how the emphasis on the safety of domestic food causes some to overlook the risks posed by raw chicken dishes. He argues that contemporary food systems grow increasingly fraught in ways that elude easy solutions and require a deeper engagement with precariousness. Barnes article explores precarious digital mothering through Instagram bento accounts in Japan. She considers the forms of gendered unpaid labor and social reproduction that are bound within the creative promise of digital entrepreneurial success through social media, and the precarious narratives of good motherhood these performative spaces perpetuate.

In this introduction we have sought to sketch out more broadly the key sources of precarity that beset food. The articles contained in this special issue provide useful examples of the many directions that critical food scholars might engage with precarity going forward. We welcome other food scholars to tinker with the concept of precarity and explore adapting it to their own research. The concept of precarious foodscapes has helped us to call attention to the daunting challenges that we face and key in on some the troubling dynamics that appear likely to hound foodscapes over the coming years if not decades.

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