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Title:
Urbanity, Precarity, and Homeland Activism: Burmese Migrants in Global Cities

Abstract:

This article interrogates the link between urbanity and ‘precarity of place’ for non-citizen populations, relying on evidence drawn from the transnational homeland activities of Burmese migrants in two global cities (Bangkok and Tokyo). First, the article builds upon literatures of precarity and global cities to detail the complexity of urban spaces in relation to migration, and draws upon understandings of political mobilisation to explain homeland activism among non-citizen populations. It then focuses respectively on Bangkok and Tokyo, demonstrating the ways in which migrants from Burma of varying precarity utilise or forgo urban structures in each city. The article concludes that precarity does not necessarily reduce homeland activism, but may change its outward appearance. Urban structures, to a greater or lesser extent, influence that relationship.

Keywords:
transnationalism, homeland politics, precarity, ‘precarity of place’, global cities, refugees, migrants

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Bio Sketch
Susan Banki’s research interests include: forced displacement and international migration, refugee resettlement, transnational social movements, human rights at the United Nations and humanitarian assistance. In particular, she is interested in the ways that questions of sovereignty, citizenship/membership and humanitarian principles have shaped our understanding of and reactions to various transnational phenomena, such as the international human rights regime, international migration and the provision of international aid. Susan’s focus is in the Asia-Pacific region, where she has conducted extensive field research in Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Japan on refugee/migrant protection, statelessness and border control. She was awarded an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) and is currently undertaking a multi-year research project to study how precarious migrant and refugee populations engage in homeland activism.
Introduction

A simple set of cyclical relationships explains why there have been such clear theoretical and empirical links drawn between urban geography, migration, and transnationalism. Cities attract migrants. Migrants are more likely to engage in transnational activities than non-migrants. Transnational activities are easily supported by the infrastructure that cities provide. Thus, it is easy to understand that a highly-skilled worker who could obtain a work visa for Tokyo, for example, would choose to do so, how she might frequently engage in transnational activities such as information and/or resource exchange with friends or family from home, and why a place like Tokyo would help facilitate such exchange. It is less clear, however, why a migrant without a work visa might choose the same path. That is, the effect of precarity on urbanity, migration, and transnationalism is less clear.

Precarious migrants may have different motivations for migrating. Their transnational behaviour may be quite different, as their focus on home may take on a more contentious hue. And the cities to which they migrate may or may not offer the same advantages of urbanity to precarious populations as they do to documented migrants. It is not clear, at the outset, if the same relationships hold for all migrant populations.

This article, then, introduces the element of precarity into the discussion about urbanity, migration, and transnational action. Focusing on a subset of transnationalism – that of homeland activism, wherein migrants engage in transnational action specifically designed to introduce reforms in the home country – and empirically comparing the experience of Burmese migrants in two global cities, Bangkok and Tokyo, this article asks: which phenomenon is more salient for homeland activists: urbanity or precarity? Put another way,
does urbanity (i.e., *the uniqueness of urban space*) facilitate migrants’ participation in homeland activism or does the precarity of non-permanent migration stem it?!

In seeking to answer this question, the article first builds upon the literatures of precarity and global cities to detail the complexity of urban spaces in relation to migration, and draws upon understandings of political mobilisation to explain homeland activism among non-citizen populations. It then focuses respectively on Bangkok and Tokyo, demonstrating the ways in which migrants from Burma of varying precarity utilise or forgo urban structures in each city. The article concludes that precarity does not necessarily reduce homeland activism, but may change its outward appearance. Urban structures, to a greater or lesser extent, influence that relationship.

**Precarity, Urbanity, and Homeland Activism**

In investigating whether the phenomenon of ‘urbanity’ or ‘precarity’ is more salient for urban migrants engaged in homeland activism, the paper will first explore the concept of precarity, and then overlay that on the global cities literature. Finally, it will locate several nexuses that detail the complexity of urban spaces in relation to precarity, migration, and political mobilisation.

**Precarity**

The notion of precarity describes the condition of being vulnerable to exploitation because of a lack of security. Most commonly the precarity literature refers to insecurity in the workplace, and Standing’s oft-cited work on the precariat details seven forms of labour security that are absent in the condition of precarity (2011: 10). Yet the notion of precarity has theoretical traction elsewhere, especially its discussion of precarity’s source in
colonialism and the neoliberal economy (see, for example, Arnold & Bongiovi 2013; Fantone 2007). Other works have expanded the understanding of the term to include a lack of security in other areas of how we manage day to day, such as access to legal documentation (Goldring & Landolt 2011), gender norms (Abrahamson 2004: 55-59; Brah 2002: 35-37; Fantone 2007) and “other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations” (Neilson & Rossiter 2005: n.p.). This latter definition, while useful in allowing us to understand the many ways that precarity can be experienced, is difficult to measure for the purposes of this article, in which we are interested in varying levels of precarity among migrant populations. Because the primary element that defines migrants’ lack of security is their ability to remain in the host country, this article will use the threat of removal, deportation, or detention as its measure. Thus, for the purposes of this article, precarity is defined as: “the extent to which an individual is vulnerable to removal, deportation, or detention because of his or her legal status and/or possession of documentation, or lack thereof, in the host country.” This is the author’s definition. Further on, in each city section, various types of legal status and their relationship to precarity will be elaborated upon.

Urbanity

The global cities literature is an entryway to understand urbanity – defined in this paper simply as the *unique features of an urban landscape*. Originating from 1980s scholarship that examined the relationship between flows of capital and differentiated flows of labour, and between highly formalized industrial financing and highly informal wages in the urban workplace, (Friedmann 1986; Sassen-Koob 1984), the global cities scholarship contends that contemporary capitalist structures have placed global cities on par with nation states themselves, commanding profound concentrations of wealth and power (Sassen 2001). That
is, “globalisation is producing a world city system that transcends national institutions, politics and culture.... World cities are seen to be converging in their economic base, spatial organisation and social structure” (Rimmer & Dick 2009: 52). Global cities, according to Ancien, are those that host a “very high concentration of the world’s financial and related industries” (2011: 2473), and have “successfully managed to transform their economies and cultures from industrial to post-industrial based” (Abrahamson 2004: 4). Building on a world systems theory foundation, key global cities theorists critique the contemporary networks that link cities, resources, and labour. While these networks facilitate “a massive upgrading and expansion of central urban areas, large portions of these cities fall into deeper poverty and infrastructural decay” (Sassen 2002b: 2).³

Global cities are intimately linked to the process of migration, both rural-urban and across national borders, although this relationship requires a good deal more theorizing (Schiller & Çağlar 2009). A defining feature of most global cities, according to Abrahamson (2004: 48) Hudson (2012: 459), and Smart and Smart (2003: 275), is the presence of hugely diverse groups of migrants. Migrants move to global cities for a variety of reasons, often following pre-established networks of migration ‘senders’ and ‘receivers’ (Holston & Appadurai 1996: 196). They are often led by the hope of a good education for their children, a community of ethnically similar migrants, and social services (Balbo & Marconi 2005). Others are encouraged by governments welcoming temporary seasonal workers, and yet others are international students or environmental refugees (Standing 2011: 93). Such movement of migrant labour is in keeping with an “economic logic” (Sassen 2001: 34), because, despite the movement of capital and manufacturing jobs to countries where labour is cheap, many jobs – often those that fulfill the 3Ds (‘dirty, demanding, and dangerous’) – must be performed in the capital-intensive environments that characterize cities. These include the
repair, maintenance, and cleaning of industrial property and services delivered in hospitals, restaurants, and child/elderly care. Jobs such as these do not necessarily require local knowledge or language skills, and their increasing demand has led to a “casualisation of work” (Sassen 2001: 285) and “facilitate(s) the employment of disadvantaged foreign workers” (Sassen 2001: 34). Despite Sassen’s exhortation that we “get over the sense of an immigration control crisis” (2000: 73) and strengthen international protocols and procedures for protecting migrants, the international migration regime’s current priority is border protection, not migrant rights’ protection.

If global cities fuel a system that runs on precarity, they also possess three features that, paradoxically, may appeal to the precarious. First, cities facilitate anonymity (Wilson 1991). Urban density notwithstanding, “neighbours may not know each other and tend to relate through telematics and automobiles with friends, relatives and entertainment sources stretched across the city and further afield” (Amin & Graham 2004: 418). For precarious populations who want to remain under the radar, and for those whose displacement experiences have led them to prefer to be among the unnoticed, anonymity is a benefit.

Second, Schiller and Çağlar note that global cities “contain the greatest concentrations of associations and institutions organised around ethnic and diasporic identities” (dryly noting the “lavish attention” paid to these groups by migration scholars) (2009: 190). The protections offered by such institutions and ethnic groups is, of course, not a panacea, but they do frequently offer the possibility of security assistance in the form of information, material assistance, and legal aid (see Arnold 2013: 481-482).
Third, “radiations of telecommunications and transport networks” (Amin 2004: 2) that have brought the distant closer are characteristic of global cities. This is admittedly a tenuous argument, because the expansion of telecommunications extends far beyond the reach of global cities. Furthermore, while public transportation is indeed most extensive and useful in global cities, its effects on precarity are less clear, because law enforcement seeking to locate undocumented migrants may search both public transport systems and private vehicles. This element requires further research.

Finally, precarious migrants have specific and rational reasons to seek out cities as places of residence and refuge. Like other migrants, they desire high quality education for their children and strong community networks (Balbo & Marconi 2005) although their precarity may preclude the former. Further, access to health services such as anti-retrovirals and mental health services attract precarious populations who are often in need of these kinds of treatment (Jacobsen 2006).

**Political Mobilisation and Homeland Activism**

This article uses the term ‘homeland activism’ to describe migrant activities that are geared toward making changes in the homeland, using transnational means. There are at least two sets of interlocking literatures that examine the modes and mechanisms of migrants involved in homeland activism: theories of political mobilisation and transnationalism. While neither will be explored here in detail, a short discussion will help to build a relationship between mobilisation and precarity.

The literature on social movements – a “constituency lacking formal representation… that make(s) publicly-visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power” (Tilly
1982: 26) – has for decades studied how people mobilise for social and political action. Precariat protests of course easily fit this description – starting with the now-famous Milan May Day 2001 protest and subsequent EuroMayday protests starting in 2005, which challenged the tenets of globalisation through creative and symbolic repertoires of contention. Since then it has been noted that “the notion of precarity has provided a rallying call and connecting device for struggles surrounding citizenship, labour rights, the social wage, and migration.” (Neilson & Rossiter 2005: n.p.). Whilst the experience of precarity is largely a negative one, suggesting a situation of vulnerability and insecurity, as a social movement, precariat protests are characterized by positivity and a celebration of identity – the Milan precariat movement has chosen to express itself, for example, through creative forms including theatre, poetry, art, literature, cinema and music (De Sario 2007: 24).

Recently there has been a growing recognition of the significant role of transnationalism in shaping the mechanisms and messages of the politics of contention (Tarrow 2005). In studying EuroMayday protests, Doerr contends that physical protests, local planning groups, and online virtual interactions among protestors served as a kind of “emerging transnational micro-public” (2010: 4), in that activists challenged accepted notions of nation-based citizenship through celebration and theatrics. Undocumented (and hence, precarious) migrants, Doerr notes, played an important role in these protests. “By making undocumented migrants’ claims a key aspect of their mobilisation, EuroMayday activists seem to politicize the ‘closed’ character of national citizenship as an ‘incomplete institution’ that needs to respond to new injustices in the context of corporate globalisation and labour immigration” (2010: 3). In the precariat movement, the “figure of the undocumented migrant [has] become the exemplary precarious worker since, in the current global formation, the entire system of
border control and detention technology provides the principle means by which capital controls the mobility of labour” (Neilson & Rossiter 2005: n.p.).

These examinations reinforce that the political transnational literature has now acknowledged the role of migrants in creating a political space “over and beyond” national borders (Wahlbeck 2002: 122). Anderson’s “long-distance nationalist” for example relies on transnational resources such as currency and propaganda to ignite change at home (1992: 13). And those who have fled a country in economic and/or political chaos are uniquely positioned for participation in homeland politics, because their opposition to current policies or power structures often stems from first-hand evidence of deprivation and or/persecution, which provides both an impetus and instrument for promoting change at home (Shain 1993: 114). Elsewhere it has been hypothesized that those who hold precarious refugee status (i.e. those who have not gained permanent citizenship in a resettlement country) may be uniquely positioned to undertake homeland activism, particularly certain elements of mobilisation, such as access to first hand information about the home country, and exposure to international stakeholders (Banki forthcoming, 2013).

Empirical evidence on the relationship between political mobilisation and precarity is mixed, even among those studying Burmese migrants. On the one hand, Eberle and Holliday researched undocumented migrants from Burma in Chiang Mai in non-domestic work locations, where it was believed that the ability for migrants to congregate at work might facilitate exposure to notions of social justice and migrants’ rights. Instead, they found a link between precarity, ignorance about rights, and political immobilisation. On the other hand, Arnold demonstrates that since 2002, political mobilisation on labour issues in Thailand has increased, and maintains that since 2008, “Burmese democracy organisations increasingly
recogniz(ed) migrants’ potential role in democratisation in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, when workers organized shipments of food and donations to those affected, demonstrating their capacity to mobilise the community and their cross-border connections in a short time frame” (Arnold 2012: 90). Brees’ work most closely matches the arguments of this article: Brees identified a range of transnational political activities among Burmese migrants and refugees along one section of the Thai-Burmese border (in Tak province), and noted that legal status affected the types of transnationalism in which activists were involved, suggesting precarity’s strong influence (Brees 2010).

**Precarity, Urbanity, and Migration**

This review has demonstrated that “global cities are typically sites of heightened economic and social inequality” (Hudson 2012: 459). Because the “transnationalization of labor includes both highly skilled and unskilled immigrants, it produces a new set of class fractions in [a] city of high-income capital managers and the low-income manual and service workers who attend them” (Holston & Appadurai 1996: 198). If globalism and global cities are indeed eroding state sovereignty, it is an open question if states’/cities’ inability to regulate migration leaves migrant homeland activists precarious and at the whim of local initiatives, or grants them greater agency to take transnational collective action. Further research is required to determine if urban infrastructure – networks, communication, transportation – has the potential to correct this imbalance. It is to this research that we now turn.

**Methods**

In the following sections, empirical research illuminates the question of the salience of urbanity vs. precarity. The focus here is on homeland activists from Burma with varying levels of precarity living in global cities, and their engagement in transnational homeland
activism in the mid-2000s, when the field research was conducted. The research thus represents a snapshot of homeland activism during a relatively short period of time. It must be noted at the outset that homeland activists constitute a small fraction of the overall migrant population in both countries. The research here is not intended to amplify the extent of homeland activism but examine the conditions under which it takes shape in urban areas.

Burma is useful as a source country because of its ‘mixed migration flows’ – that is, its migrants lie anywhere and everywhere on the continuum of voluntary to forced. Van Hear et al. have noted that this policy distinction is problematic because “poverty, inequality and conflict co-exist, so that much migration in many parts of the world is mixed, in nature, both in terms of motivations and the character of the flows” (Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa 2009: 1). Yet the delivery of status and documentation is formed by these differentiations, which means that policymakers determine the status of migrants from Burma, who will subsequently experience a range of precarity levels (Brees 2010: 296).

Bangkok and Tokyo were chosen because they are both global cities with Burmese migrant populations. Furthermore, Bangkok was chosen in response to concerns that examinations of prominent urban spaces often neglect the Global South, as do studies of transnational activities (Brees 2010: 283).

To appraise both precarity and homeland activism in both cities, primary and secondary research was extensively conducted. Field research was conducted in 2005 in Bangkok and in 2004 and 2005 in Tokyo. First, stakeholders who work with migrant populations, such as UN staff and NGO employees, were interviewed. Second, interviews were conducted with migrants involved in homeland activism. Purposive snowball sampling was observed in order
to obtain migrants with a range of precarity levels. Third, interviews were supplemented by direct observation at cultural and political meetings with transnational purposes, such as closed strategic planning meetings and public ethnic celebrations and political protests. In all cases, respondents were assured anonymity, both in name and regards to the specific organisations for which they worked.

Field research – both interviews and direct observation – was triangulated by in-depth media analyses of international, regional and local media from 1997 to 2007. This helped to gauge the public face of homeland activism and to substantiate migrants’ claims and perceptions of precarity. Data were analysed to determine first, if there was a correlation between precarity and homeland activism, and second, if urban structures played a role in shaping that relationship. While there have been significant changes inside Burma following the temporal scope of this field research, the focus here remains on that window, before recent reforms had commenced.

**Bangkok**

Eight interviews were conducted with homeland activists in Bangkok: 3 had no documentation whatsoever, rendering them highly precarious. The other 5 possessed status or documentation (or combinations thereof) that gave them some sense of security, albeit temporary. The possession of a *work permit* (held by one informant) was the most precarious – first, work permits at that time were only granted for two years maximum, second, it only permitted regional travel (i.e., not outside of the greater Bangkok area) and third, it required that its holder work full time in factories or fields, meaning that any political work had to be conducted at other times. The possession of a *student visa* (held by two informants) offered slightly more protection, as did *Burmese passports* (held by three informants). While
proferring either of these documents would protect against immediate removal and/or detention, engaging in public political activities could run the risk of changing that equation. A final informant had a spouse with secure status. This, in and of itself, was not sufficient to mitigate against removal from Bangkok; even activists with Thai spouses, were, by 2005, required to move to the border camps.⁵

**Precarity in Bangkok**

While Bangkok served as a headquarters of sorts for pro-democracy activists throughout the 1990s, increasingly restrictive policies imposed by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) meant that homeland activism was quite rare in Bangkok by 2004-2005, when this research was conducted. Activists who had formerly been assigned ‘Person of Concern’ (POC) status by UNHCR were, by 2004, either resettled in countries of the Global North or had been told to move to border camps or risk deportation. Even those refugees with UNHCR papers were no longer protected, as the arrest of 11 UNHCR-recognised refugees in June 2003 demonstrated (Ganjanakhundee 2003).

Three important points emerge from this examination of documentation, restrictions, and associated precarity: first, protest activities in Bangkok should not be thought to reflect the patterns and heft of homeland activism in other parts of Thailand. The argument in this section is merely that despite significant precarity, homeland activism remained, and it questions if urbanity played a role.⁶ Second, the mere fact of engaging in any homeland activities was liable to render protestors precarious. Third, and related, homeland activism not only made individual protestors more insecure, but increased restrictions on the entire movement. As one NGO informant explained, every time a group engages in homeland activism that can be traced to migrants and/or refugees, the publicity is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it brings publicity for the cause, but on the other hand, it inevitably
leads to a swift response from government officials to crack down against political activists, whether their activities are public are not.\(^7\)

One example will suffice to demonstrate this pattern: In September 1999, Bangkok tolerated daily rallies by activists at the Burmese Embassy in connection with the ‘Four Nines’ movement, which, it was hoped, would spur activists to coalesce around the 9-9-99 date and send a unified message to protest against the Burmese regime. Thai authorities reported to the *Associated Press* that they disapproved (1999). However, protests and hunger strikes continued throughout the month of September. On October 1, however, a fringe dissident group took over the Burmese embassy in Bangkok, causing great embarrassment to the RTG. Within one week, *The Nation* reported that henceforth, Burmese exilees would face strict immigration curbs. “In order to avoid a repeat of the drama, the authorities plan to beef up their security at the embassy and everywhere else where students, dissidents, refugees and immigrants gather together. The National Security Council also will hold talks soon with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on relocating some of the Burmese students... to third countries” (*The Nation* 1999).

The year 2005, when field research was conducted, offers a sobering snapshot of RTG intervention, changes in precarity, and homeland activists’ responses. From March to May 2005, under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s leadership, restrictions against both refugees and migrants increased greatly. Renewed and far more stringent efforts were made to ensure that urban refugees were required to move to camps on the border, and migrants all over the country were required to register. While restrictive policies had been announced before (for refugees in 1999, as noted, and for migrants in 2004), the efforts to collect data on
all migrants for purposes of surveillance and control, and improved technological capacity to identify false documents, made removal and/or detention increasingly likely.

**Homeland Activism**

RTG restrictions on migrants in urban areas did not entirely stop homeland activism in Bangkok. Instead, mobilisation morphed into new forms of transnational expression, relying on a broader range of protest strategies and regional actors. For example, in December 2001, at the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Peace Prize, the civil society organisation Forum Asia held a Peace Concert in Bangkok with the hope of attracting both Burmese and Thai audiences. To ensure participation from the Burmese community, however, activists developed a nuanced strategy that would permit not only political refugees to attend, but the broader Burmese public. In an article on 8 December 2001 by *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), a staff member at Forum Asia, Chalida Tajaroensuk, observed that a cultural event had been chosen over a political one specifically to ensure that Burmese migrants (without refugee status) could attend (AFP 2001). Thus the shifting of transnational work away from public protests and toward other means of advocacy forced activists to become, in the words of Debbie Stothard, the Coordinator of the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (Altsean) “far more sophisticated and more thoughtful in the way they carry out their activities” (AFP 2000).

Even against the backdrop of increasingly restrictive RTG policy vis-a-vis migrant populations, homeland activism among Burmese migrants nevertheless continued in Bangkok in 2005, on a smaller and more concealed scale, and this perhaps says even more about the power of transnational activities than in times when such activism was more easily permitted. During 2005, homeland activism took four primary forms in Bangkok.
First, through **media activism**, political actors engaged in the collection, framing, and delivery of information from inside Burma to distribute to regional and international media sources. The transnational work of obtaining true and accurate, as well as real-time, news from inside Burma is an activity not unique to Bangkok as a global city, and, in fact, is easier to carry out in areas near the border. This is one of the reasons why numerous exiled media groups are located closer to the border, such as the *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima* in Chiang Mai and publications from the Karen Human Rights Group in Mae Sot. Nevertheless, Bangkok, as an international city and a hub for travel in Southeast Asia, continues to play a role as a gateway city where sources from inside Burma are projected to larger audiences. As one activist noted, “The guy from the *Wall Street Journal* doesn’t want to take the bus to Mae Sot.” As the home of two international English newspapers, Bangkok’s position as a regional focal point for news is uncontested.

All 3 undocumented respondents were engaged in media activism (as well as one respondent with a passport), suggesting that precarity did not serve as a deterrence. Rather, the most important criterion was an internet connection in one’s private home. As crowded as private spaces might be, with migrants living in very close quarters (one respondent noted living with two other families in two bedrooms) it was here, rather than in public internet cafés, where activists penned articles for the aforementioned publications produced by Burmese exiled media. In addition, media activists were called upon as sources to confirm information, where, in the midst of the capital’s anonymity, they were able to meet in local coffee shops/food stalls to talk to reporters from international and regional newspapers, including those printed out of Singapore, Thailand, the United States, and United Kingdom.
Bangkok’s plentiful internet connections and anonymity aided media activism, even for the most precarious.

Second, activists both received and delivered educational training in Bangkok, where they engaged in courses of varied lengths that covered issues such as current events, regional politics, international law, the substance of human rights, researching human rights, and human rights advocacy. Some courses targeted migrants (both documented and undocumented), where discussions about labour rights in Thailand were coupled with assertions about the importance of democracy in Burma. Recent scholarship confirms this merging of labour rights and the promotion of democracy, observing that for one important labour organisation, “regime change and democratisation are necessary preconditions for substantial improvements in migrants’ socio-economic situation” (Arnold 2012: 96). Other courses’ students hailed primarily from inside Burma, where the precise purpose of the courses was to prepare participants, once finished, to return to their communities (either inside Burma or on the Thai-Burmese border) in order to put into practice the transnational knowledge they obtained. Most of these students were highly precarious, having arrived in Thailand without documentation. Trainings such as these (and participants’ positions of precarity) were not unique to Bangkok and in fact were more likely to take place in areas where the vast majority of refugees from Burma reside (i.e., along the Thai Burmese border) but Bangkok’s trainings were, in the words of one international staff of a Bangkok training, “close to centers of power. This is the closest we can bring our students to government officials and UN agencies.” Indeed, trainees not only studied in Bangkok, but attended media events, lectures, and report launches, for example. Bangkok’s plentiful and sprawling housing made it possible to house such trainings, and its anonymity and extensive public
transformation permitted trainees both with and without documentation to attend at least some events.13

Third, homeland activism was undertaken through lobbying. Bangkok’s ability to draw regional as well as international powerholders made it the logical meeting place for homeland activists to meet with the representatives of both governments and NGOs that were sympathetic to the cause of democracy in Burma. These meetings were generally of a concealed nature, and included, for example, a meeting between Bangkok-based homeland activists and US representatives to discuss UN Security Council treatment of Burma.14 Another meeting occurred between activists and ASEAN parliamentarians to discuss the potential for ASEAN to serve as a pressure point for change in Burma, particularly to campaign against Burma securing the Chairmanship of ASEAN at that time.15 Finally, activists met with regional advocacy organisations looking to communicate directly with the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs to apply pressure on Burma.16 Clearly, Bangkok’s position as a regional hub facilitated such lobbying. Interestingly, lobbying was undertaken by activists with varying levels of precarity – both the undocumented and those with passports. This may indicate that official legal status is less important than personal connections when activists are engaged in homeland activities with high-level powerholders.

Finally, while greatly reduced when compared to previous years, public protests did occur in Bangkok in 2005, owing to the city’s role as a global city that hosts international companies and embassies. That they occurred at all in the punishing atmosphere of Thaksin’s reign points to Bangkok’s appeal. These included a small rally in February 2005 at the Burmese Embassy to oppose the reconvening of Burma’s National Convention17 (Yeni 2005), and a demonstration by the ethnic minority Shan in April 2005 to support the formation of a new
government in Shan State in Burma. The latter protest, as observed by news sources, notes that the demonstrators were Thai of ethnic Shan origin (Khuenkaew 2005), raising the question of whether migrants of any levels of precarity participated in the protest at all. “Pre-Thaksin, it was Burmese Golden Days in Thailand,” observed one homeland activist without documentation. “Doing public activities, I and others can definitely get into trouble. But I spent 7 years in a Burmese prison. I am not scared of Thai police.”

Echoing these emotions, another noted, “The RTG is not the problem. People can be active. The problem is the SPDC (Burmese government). If we go back, they will know who we are.”

The logic of the activist: contextualizing homeland activism in Bangkok

This section has demonstrated that homeland activism persisted in Bangkok in spite of high levels of precarity, and it suggests that urban features such as access to powerholders and anonymity (and perhaps, public transportation) have played a role. Given the precarity of these migrants’ lives in Bangkok, however, it is also important to contextualize their motivations, not only as people engaged in activism, but as individuals. Given that so many activists left Bangkok, what induced a small number to remain, and what does this say about the relationship between urbanity and precarity?

These are difficult questions to answer, for two reasons. First, motivation for remaining in Bangkok was not the subject of interviews when they were conducted in 2005, although some conclusions can be extrapolated from their circumstances. Second, devotion to the cause of democracy in Burma is such an important part of activists’ narrative that it tends to overshadow other factors, particularly in discussion with a researcher who is asking specifically about homeland activism.
One figure that sheds some light on this question, however, is that of the 8 migrants interviewed, 6 received financial compensation for their work. It can be assumed that their salaries (a term used loosely as there is no evidence of official contractual obligations) provided its recipients with a way to make a living. That is, activism was their employment. It may be that, given the choice between living safely at the border or remaining gainfully and meaningfully employed in Bangkok but faced with precarity of place, some chose the latter. We might term this the ‘logic of the activist’ (as differentiated from the logic of activism) because it emphasises choices made by individuals, rather than consider them as decisions of units of a social movement.

The ‘logic of the activist’ by no means suggests that activists worked only for salaries, but it does suggest that Bangkok was a draw for reasons other than its global city features. We can surmise that there were other reasons for remaining in Bangkok: at least two informants had family members that planned to remain in Bangkok for a long time. Those on student visas were enrolled in Bangkok-based universities, and valued the education they were receiving. Another said he found Bangkok less precarious than the border: “Mae Sot is more dangerous (than Bangkok) because within a half hour you can be back in Burma.” And all 8 conveyed the importance of the work that they were doing.

While it is difficult to separate out migrants’ personal choices from political strategies of their organisations, it is not the intention of this article to suggest that political commitment, detached from personal circumstances, would encourage migrants to engage in activism regardless of risks in Bangkok. This section has instead demonstrated that Bangkok’s appeal as an urban city includes not only its political advantages, but for some activists, social and
economic ones. The logic of the activist therefore extends beyond considerations of political opportunity.

**Tokyo**

In 2004 and 2005, a total of 36 migrants were interviewed in Tokyo, 12 with documentation from UNHCR indicating their asylum seeker status, 14 with official protection-related status (either through refugee status or through ‘Special Permission’ status, and heretofore referred to as ‘refugees’) 4 migrants with legal documentation (henceforth ‘documented migrants’), and 6 with no documentation.

**Precarity in Tokyo**

This article does not delve into the additional numerous sub-categories into which migrants can fall; prior work has detailed this (Banki 2006; Dean 2006). What is important is that, in Japan (and in contrast to Thailand), refugee status proffers its holders freedom to travel and reside anywhere in Japan, although they cannot return to Burma and may have difficulty securing visas to other countries. Conversely, documented migrants can reside in Japan easily and travel freely internationally, assuming their visas to remain in Japan remain valid. Thus, precarity (and its lack) for documented migrants is linked to the length of the visa.

For other categories, Japan has experienced some of the same cyclical waves of permission and restriction as occurred in Thailand, although the peaks and troughs have been perhaps less pronounced. In the years 2004 and 2005, a pervasive atmosphere of precarity characterized their experience, which reflected an increasingly tough stance on migrants by the Japanese government. First, the Government of Japan (GoJ) started enforcing a policy (on the books for a long time, but ignored) that employers could be fined and imprisoned for
hiring undocumented migrants. Second, massive sweeps were conducted to reduce the undocumented population. To more easily identify the undocumented – both those with no papers whatsoever and those whose visas had expired (i.e. overstayers) – there was even an email address to which citizens could send anonymous information about undocumented foreigners.

These restrictions meant that one of the advantages of urban space, and a particular asset in Tokyo – an extensive and relatively inexpensive public transportation system – was underutilised by precarious populations. Several respondents noted that a fear of train conductors limited their use of trains, and hence, because taxis are prohibitively expensive in Tokyo, their ability to easily travel outside of walking distance. This fear was not unfounded; in early 2004 two Burmese overstayers were arrested on their way to attend a political meeting, \(^{21}\) and in mid-2005 four others were arrested at train stations on their way to work.\(^ {22}\)

For those seeking asylum, significant changes that went into effect in May 2005 actually decreased the precarity of this population, at least in the short term. First, asylum seekers who previously were placed into detention simply for seeking asylum were now eligible for provisional release, which permitted them to reside in Japan while their claim was being decided, although it offered no rights to work or travel outside one’s regional area (prefecture), and has thus been labelled “limited legal status” (Dean 2006: 25). Second, the ‘60-day rule’, which held that asylum applications must be made within 60 days of arrival in Japan, was abolished (Dean 2006). It is not surprising that this combination of increasing restrictions on the undocumented population and a slightly better set of opportunities for asylum seekers would result in an increase in the number of asylum seekers. From 2002 to
2005, the number of asylum seekers in Japan increased by 250%, from 384 to 1,353 (UNHCR 2007).

One notable difference between Tokyo and Bangkok concerns the requirement to demonstrate legality in Japan in order to rent a place to live, open a bank account, and even purchase a cell phone. The advantages of accessible communication structures (internet in the home and the relative ease of obtaining mobile technology) that are generally associated with urban spaces are reduced because of these requirements. Of course, undocumented migrants do find places to live and obtain cell phones, but they do so with the help of the legal population. In the Burmese community, nearly every person interviewed (including those who are now refugees but were undocumented in prior years) credited documented migrants with offering help setting up bank accounts, acting as legal guarantors, and providing cell phones to their compatriots.

**Homeland Activism**

Tokyo plays a far greater role as a centre for homeland activism in Japan, relative to Bangkok in Thailand. Two reasons clearly explain this phenomenon. First, as already noted, the GoJ permits its refugee population to reside in urban areas, while the RTG no longer does. Second, most migrants to Japan arrive by airplane, and Tokyo is the most direct port of arrival, so migrants’ first stop would be Tokyo. All but one respondent (a sailor who arrived by boat and remained in Japan without documentation) arrived by airplane. By contrast, in Thailand, most migrants cross the land border with Burma and their reasons to travel to Bangkok are limited (and further discouraged by aforementioned restrictions).
During the time of this field research, the backdrop of living in one of the world’s most expensive cities clearly shaped the nature and scope of transnational activism for the city’s migrants from Burma. The high cost of living in Tokyo rendered it nearly impossible for migrants to devote their full energies to political activism, because they had to make a living to pay for rent, food, medical costs, and other daily expenses. One migrant in Tokyo, comparing himself to a friend and colleague in Bangkok, stated, “He has a generous salary from (the donor) and he is able to manage on this for all his costs. My (political) activities are important but I have to feed my family.” Indeed, out of 36 interviewed in Tokyo, only 1 was able to make a living as an activist, while 6 out of 8 were able to do so in Bangkok.

Four types of homeland activism were noted in Tokyo. First, that most common and written-about transnational phenomenon, sending remittances (see, for example, Massey & Parrado 1994; Portes 2007), took a unique shape for political activists in Tokyo, because migrants sent money for political causes to two destinations: individual family members and friends in Burma, and to the Thai-Burmese border. Remittances were sent primarily through well-worn and illegal channels. Burmese migrant shopkeepers who worked in the winding streets of Takadanobaba, where many Burmese live and congregate, collected money from the senders (of all precarity levels), along with the names and phone numbers of the recipients in Burma, and through their contacts in Burma passed that money along in Burmese currency. Tokyo’s prevalence of Western Unions, and specifically the presence of one in Takadanobaba, might have suggested that transmittances were sent through this formal channel, but informal channels were far more popular. “It works on trust, but it works.”

Second, homeland activists participated in public protests in Tokyo, and, during the time of the research, with much greater frequency than in Bangkok. Protests occurred at least on a
weekly basis, where one could find protesters standing outside the embassy with posters in Burmese, Japanese, and English. One interviewee suggested that signs were often written in English at protests because English-speaking newspapers were more likely to cover the protests. Posters generally commemorated specific political anniversaries, called for Aung San Suu Kyi's release, or urged the restoration of democracy in Burma.

It has been argued elsewhere that a triadic relationship between transnational events, legal status, and local community informs the ways in which Burmese in Japan engage in public contentious events, which skews what might otherwise be our assumptions about which legal categories will go public and which will be concealed (Banki 2006). For example, documented migrants did not protest publicly because it would impact their ability to travel back to Burma. They did not want their faces known to Burmese authorities, and embassy officials have been known to film the gatherings outside their embassy.

Conversely, protests were heavily attended by those we might consider at the mid-precarity level: asylum seekers. This can be explained by several factors. First, asylum seekers believed that their cases would be substantiated more easily if they could prove political involvement in Japan. Second, they believed that such public action could, perhaps counter-intuitively, reduce their precarity. Those with provisional release could still be stopped by the police, who often asked for ‘evidence’ of asylum claims. Some asylum seekers in fact carried photographs of themselves in the process of demonstrating for this reason. This support’s Shah’s argument that those with uncertain legal status have an additional incentive to engage in public activism if they believe that it will help support their asylum claims (Shah 1999).
The prohibition against working served as an incentive to asylum seekers to maximise their time in the safest way possible. The reasoning was: the best way to limit the chance of being deported is to avoid working, and the best way to improve the chance of obtaining refugee status is to engage in demonstrations (this belief was prevalent, UNHCR’s insistence to the contrary notwithstanding). This fact is not meant to imply that asylum seekers only chose to demonstrate in order to gain legal recognition, but it did make them more likely to choose this activity over others, because demonstrations are a clear and simple message to the refugee regime in Japan: I don't like my country's government, and I will be in danger if I return. Thus the ‘logic of the activist’ encourages some forms of mobilisation over others.

Not surprisingly, undocumented migrants were notably absent from protests, despite comprising a significant portion of the Burmese population in Tokyo. For many years, overstayers were in fact present at protests, because “police were reluctant to arrest people when they were at a demonstration. There was no policy on this but we thought that there would be political repercussions from arresting people when they were protesting.” Then, in 2004, an overstayer who often protested at the Burmese embassy was arrested and deported back to Burma, whereupon he was detained straight from the airport. This sobering account, which circulated from Rangoon and back to Tokyo, discouraged any remaining overstayers who had been present at protests.

Third, both undocumented and documented migrants attended periodic meetings, targeted at their ethnic groups, where they kept abreast of specific news from their ethnic states. In addition, nearly all of the ethnic minority activists interviewed were likely to attend monthly meetings of the recently-formed Association of United Nationalities (AUN), an umbrella group constituted by all of the ethnic minorities from Burma. This included Shan, Karen,
Kachin, Chin, Paluang, and Arakan migrants, for example, but notably excluded the Rohingya, because ‘they aren’t part of the original race of the country, and they get help from Islamic countries anyway’ (demonstrating that discrimination crosses borders as easily as do migrants). In addition to sharing current events information, AUN meetings allowed ethnic groups to coalesce around broader questions of governance and decision-making processes, building trust and sharing common experiences of oppression, such as one discussion about the effects on ordinary villagers of the poppy plantations in northern Shan state. These meetings were held in areas regularly frequented by Burmese migrants, such as Takadanobaba, reinforcing the utility of the urban feature of ethnic enclaves.

The final type of homeland activism at play in Tokyo was the most central to its role as a global city: lobbying. While public meetings were generally only attended by those with secure status, actors of varying precarity engaged in coordinated efforts to maximise the utility of accessing resident and visiting powerholders. For example, in 2004, Burmese activists prepared for a visit to Tokyo from the UN Special Envoy to Burma, Mr. Razali Ismail, to protest his suggestion of resumption of overseas development aid to Burma. Undocumented migrants aided those with greater security to sift through fact-finding reports and highlight the most damning human rights testimonials to present to Mr. Ismail. Such research, which can be carried out by the most precarious, requires little more than a good internet connection and access to good printing facilities, something in abundance in Tokyo.

Tokyo’s ‘Logic of the Activist’

Tokyo is the epitome of the global city, with anonymity, public transportation, ethnic enclaves, and international powerholders in abundance. These urban features, however, had
little ability to trump precarity, because stricter adherence to legal documentation in Japan minimised some of the advantages of urbanity and at the same time magnified activists’ reliance upon documented migrants, subsequently complicating the relationship between urbanity and precarity. The highly precarious engaged only in invisible acts of contention (remittances and private periodic meetings), and participated minimally. This can be explained by: 1) the specificity of Japan’s danger zones for migrants (including public transportation and outside public spaces); 2) the difficulty of making activism a lucrative enough form of employment to carry out activities full time; and 3) recently adopted asylum seeker policies.

Paradoxically, migrants’ decisions about which activities to conduct reflect the same ‘logic of the activist’ discussed in the Bangkok section, with different results. In Tokyo, public events held a dual function: to raise public awareness about the abuses of the Burmese regime, and to validate asylum seekers’ claims. As a global city, Tokyo facilitates these dual roles, thus supporting Sassen’s claim that it is one of the “new geographies of centrality at the inter-urban level,” creating a “thick enabling environment” for the airing of “transboundary issues concerning immigration, asylum, international women’s agendas, and anti-globalization struggles” (2002a: 217).

**Comparison and Conclusion**

Data analysing homeland activism in Bangkok and Tokyo yielded similar and dissimilar results. Homeland activism continued despite increasing precarity, although the shape of activism changed as policies did. That is, precarity seems to have had a strong concealment effect on homeland activism, as precarious populations generally engaged in less visible action. In both cities, access to powerholders permitted lobbying that would have been
difficult in other locations in the country. In Bangkok particularly, urban structures such as technology and communication improved the ability to engage in media information collection and distribution, mitigating precarity and enabling mobilisation. For more visible actions, such as protests, urban structures offered little assistance in facilitating the most precarious migrants’ participation.

The research further found that possession of specific documentation was not the only factor to determine precarity. Nor were RTG and GoJ policies – in place for many years, but inconsistently applied – effective in stopping homeland activism. The research supports Greer’s contention that “the city no longer controls much of its own destiny, because its polity is subject to decisions that originate far beyond its own boundaries,” (Greer 1989: 343). Thus Burmese migrants in Bangkok and Tokyo took their cues in part from actions in Burma and from the broader Burmese diaspora and the international community, including funders and powerholders.

This research has theoretical and practical merit. It introduces the concept of ‘precarity of place’ into discussions about transnational homeland activism, encouraging us to understand the heterogeneity of migrants’ types of transnational action (Brees 2010). It demonstrates that precarity can be increased or mitigated by a variety of factors, including networks, social ties, and variance in implementation of formal policies and laws (Banki forthcoming, 2013). And it supports the notion of the ‘logic of the activist’, suggesting that we account for the personal and familial choices that activists make, as well as those that are politically and strategically expedient. Practically, the findings suggest that restrictive immigration policy does not necessarily reduce homeland activism, but may change its outward appearance so that precarious migrants choose clandestine repertoires of contention. Precarious migrant
populations still have the agency to try to reform oppressive home regimes, and, for those who support those goals, urban spaces are an important component of transnational mobilisation.

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1 Migrants from Burma fall somewhere on a continuum of voluntary to forced, and thus may be labelled ‘economic migrants’ or ‘refugees’ or other categories that attempt to offer differentiation. The purpose of this article is neither to ascertain motivation nor to judge who is one category or another. Thus, with the exception of when it is relevant for purposes of explaining different sets of documentation, this article speaks broadly of ‘migrants’ and encompasses all categories within this term.

2 To differentiate this definition of precarity from others, we might well call it ‘precarity of place.’ In sections of the article where differentiation between the two concepts is necessary, I will use ‘labour precarity’ and ‘precarity of place.’ In other sections, ‘precarity’ will suffice to describe the presented definition. See Banki (2013) for a further discussion of ‘precarity of place’.

3 Some claim that the global cities literature “produces a very limited understanding of the processes and conditions that underlie, enable and constrain the production and reproduction of global cities” (Ancien 2011: 2477). Other critiques of the global cities literature include Amin and Graham, who are concerned about a trajectory toward homogeneity in patterns identified (2004) and Glick and Çağlar, who suggest a scalar model through which to understand cities, based on ‘hierarchical fields of power’ (2009: 189).

4 Confidential interview, TN3, November 2005.

5 Confidential interview, TN2, November 2005.

6 One might also inquire, if homeland activism was minimal in Bangkok, why it should be the focus of a study at all, when far more activity was taking place along the border and in Chiang Mai? First, this article attempts to compare how Burmese fare in global cities, and Bangkok and Tokyo provide an apt comparison. Second, the restrictions imposed specifically in Bangkok cast a long shadow of precarity there, and allow us to truly to delve into the urbanity vs. precarity question. While homeland activities indeed were and continue to be rife in Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang, and Mae Sot, that is not the subject of this article.

7 Confidential interview, TN4, November 2005.

8 Confidential interview, BKK4, December 2005. This observation may be less relevant today than in 2005 because, after many years of closure, the Mae Sot airport reopened, making access to the border easier for
international stakeholders. Nevertheless, the respondent’s point was that, particularly when trying to make a case with reporters who may be less than sympathetic or more focused on economic effects, a face-to-face meeting is important.

9 Confidential interview, BKK2, December 2005.
10 Confidential interview, BKK4, December 2005.
11 Confidential interview, BKK7, BKK8, November 2005.
12 Confidential interview, TN6, December 2005.
13 Confidential interviews, BKK6, BKK8, November 2005.
14 Confidential interview, BKK1, December 2005.
15 Confidential interview, BKK1, December 2005.
16 Confidential interview, BKK8, November 2005.
17 Burma’s National Convention was first initiated in 1993 by the then ruling Burmese government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), to draw up a new constitution. Thereafter it stalled for 8 years when the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) withdraw in protest when it was clear that SLORC-picked delegates and a SLORC-controlled agenda removed any possibility for genuine representation. In 2004 the current ruling government (SPDC) reconvened the Convention but “the entire process was simply a rubber stamp for the regime’s agenda” (Rogers 2012: 206).

18 Confidential interview, BKK1, December 2005.
19 Confidential interview, BKK3, November 2005.
20 Confidential interview, BKK2, December 2005.
21 Confidential interview, JR17, April 2004.
22 Confidential interview, JR38, August 2005.
23 Confidential interview, JR24, April 2004.
25 Confidential interview, JR33, August 2005.
27 Confidential interviews, JR 21 and 22, April 2004.
28 Confidential interview, JR17, November 2005.
29 Confidential interview, JR17, November 2005.
30 Confidential interview, JR 28, April 2004.
31 Confidential interview, JR 32, August 2005, direct observation at AUN meeting (with interpretation), August 2005.
32 Confidential interviews and direct observation, JR11 and JR12, April 2004.