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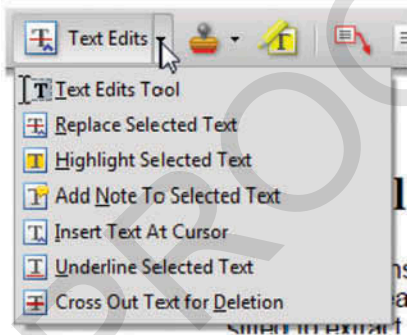
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Precarity of place: a complement to the growing precariat literature

AQ1   Susan Banki*

This article suggests that our current understandings of precarity are insufficient to
describe the specific challenges of noncitizen living. It offers a counter concept that is
related, but distinct from precarity: 'precarity of place'. The term, far from being
focused on the way precarity manifests itself in the workplace, instead focuses on
the challenges of physical residence for migrants and the tightrope-like nature of
migrant life. The article draws several parallels between the growing literature on
what I call 'labour precarity' and 'precarity of place', including its origins in coloni-
alism and neoliberalism, its nebulous class quality, and social movement responses.
Drawing on examples from Burmese migrant populations in Thailand, the article posits
that 'precarity of place' be considered in conjunction with, but separated from, our
current understandings of (labour) precarity.

Introduction

The growing precarity literature offers some valuable ways of thinking about both the
roots of and responses to precarity, whether defined existentially, economically, or inter-
subjectively. As the terms 'precariat', 'precarious', and 'precarity' grow ever more
popular in the academic literature, it should also be noted that the term, in its eagerness
to encompass all those who experience precarity, fails to properly capture the challenges
of one of its subset populations: that of noncitizens.

Rather than discard the term altogether, this article incorporates elements from the
precariat literature and offers a counter (sub)concept: 'precarity of place'. The article
reviews the precarity literature and then argues for the importance of a separate term for
'precarity of place', as differentiated from labour precarity, noting how the concepts are
uneasily aligned, that is, they complement each other but offer clearly distinct experiences
to their victims. The article turns to an example from the Global South to illuminate
similarities and differences between the two concepts, drawing on Burmese migrant
populations in Thailand, and concludes with suggestions for future research, both theore-
tical and empirical.

Precarity and the precariat

The notion of precarity describes the condition of being vulnerable to exploitation because
of a lack of security. Precarity suggests the *potential* for exploitation and abuse, but not its
certain presence. Thus precarious work is not the fact of consistent unemployment, but the
looming threat, and perhaps frequent fact, of it. Precarity of residence does not suggest
imminent deportation from a country, but its very real possibility. Similarly, social
precarity does not describe an absence of supportive networks, but the potential for
their dismantling. The literature has made frequent reference to the fact that precarity of
one kind may aggravate other precarities. For example, precarious legal status affects the
ability to secure stable work. Social networks are weakened when people are uprooted.

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And an unstable work environment can stem the ability to develop relationships, as those   40
in precarious situations lack the social infrastructure to create networks and lack the
confidence and financial resources that much socialising requires (Goldring and Landolt
2011).

The intellectual founders and forerunners of precarity comprise Bourdieu, who articu-
lated the term in 1998, Foucault, Habermas, Hardt and Negri, and Arendt (Standing 2011,   45
2). It has further been explored by Butler, whose treatment of the notion delves into our
understandings of self-sovereignty (and its lack) and suggests a communal approach to
nonviolence that encourages a repositioning of not only our ethnic and racial frames, but
our human ones (relative to nonhumans) (2006). This philosophical positioning of the
term sowed the seeds for an empirically grounded concept, of which precariat is the result.   50

The precariat, referred to by Standing as 'globalisation's child' (2011, 5), is not
necessarily part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat' but instead consists of social
'classes' on either side of the proletariat – both highly educated and motivated creative
workers struggling to find secure employment, on the one hand, and a *lumpen proletariat*-
minus-stability, on the other hand. Each 'type' of precariat class member faces different   55
challenges, although the first certainly has more freedom and flexibility than the second.

Precarious work, which since the 1970s has become nearly a universal phenomenon,
is defined by Branch and Hanley as employment that is 'uncertain, unpredictable, and
risky from the point of view of the worker' (2011, 569). They argue that the nature of
such work is felt particularly acutely by low-skill and low-wage workers (2011). Fantone   60
reminds us that precariousness is an inherent feature of capitalism and although it is more
pronounced in western, post-Fordist capitalist cities recently transformed by globalisation
and information technologies, in colonial cities hyperexploitation of labour, particularly
women's domestic labour, has always been the norm (2007, 10).

Despite the lengthy history of the precarious nature of capitalism, the precariat   65
movement only relatively recently found its wings in the stirrings of the 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. The
movement demands universal rights for workers (Doerr 2010, 4), free migration policies,
and a universal basic income (Dean 2012, 356) (also known as a 'citizenship income', 'a   70
form of welfare [allowing workers] to choose which professional path to pursue and what
to produce' (Galetto et al. 2007, 111), which would ensure the 'right to decent work'
enshrined, in Dean's interpretation, in Article 23[1] of the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights (2012, 357)).

Most commonly the precarity literature refers to insecurity in the workplace, and   75
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, as the examples above and the literature below indicate, and 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 debt and indebtedness (Ross 2008), access to   80
legal documentation (Goldring and Landolt 2011), gender norms (Brah 2002;
Abrahamson 2004; Fantone 2007), and 'other aspects of intersubjective life, including
housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations' (Neilson and Rossiter
2005, n.p.).

Critiques and variations of the use of precarity as a term have emerged along with its   85
increasing popularity. These include charges of US-centrism (Lee and Kofman 2012),
which this article tries to correct by a focus on the Global South. There has also been
considerable debate on the 'newness' of precarity as a condition of work or a structural

feature of a social class (Mitropoulos 2005). As part of the history of capitalism, many people around the world have, after all, been subject to unreliable, unprotected and poorly paid work conditions for centuries; the contemporary 'naming' of the precariat arguably comes about through the cultural capital of the middle classes enabling them to name their conditions as their standards of living decompose and they become exposed to the risks that are routine for so many other workers.

Indeed, as precarity has increasingly encompassed a greater number of actors – the poor, the rich, the creative, the human, the animal, the worker, the temporary worker, the nonworker, the migrant, and the refugee – there is real concern that its essence has been diluted. Yet there are populations for which the underlying concept of precarity is useful, because it describes both the roots of precarity in global systems and its outcomes in creating differentiated types of sufferers. Specifically, this article argues, there is value to capturing a subset of the precariat: that of non-citizens, who experience 'precarity of place'.

Precarity of place

The precarity of noncitizens is particular, and at the same time, it aligns closely with broader concepts in the precariat literature. Yet 'precarity of place' deserves its own analysis because, as the extensive migration literature notes, our current global system is organised around units of nation states, and it is primarily from these units, and national governments, that our rights accrue. Arendt famously related those with no state to those with no rights ([1951]1979). While the introduction of an international human rights regime makes individuals subjects of *humanity* and not *nationality*, in practice, it is sovereign governments that protect (or fail to protect) these rights. Even without using rights language, we can argue that membership in a group proffers benefits, and that in our current international system, the body that controls the distribution of the vast portion of benefits that can render our lives better (and less precarious) is the state.

Denizenship, just short of citizenship, suggests that the state can offer a suite of rights, in effect, picking and choosing the rights they want to protect and the services they want to offer (see, e.g., Hammar 1990). Even post-national membership positions the state as the actor that distributes rights and benefits, though in this scheme, not on the basis of nationality but according to other categories – rights of residents, workers, and so on (Tambini 2001; Standing 2011, chapter 4; Soysal 2012). That the state should be the benefactor of privileges when membership is not defined by nationality requires deeper examination. For example, arrangements between Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos to register migrant workers, or arrangements between India, Nepal and Bhutan to permit access to higher education and the ability to open bank accounts permit cross-national benefits and rights that are tied to regional location, not national ones. Yet it is national governments, examining residence, that proffer the benefits of these regional programs.

While the artifice of national membership remains salient, there is a physical, place-based importance to these rights and benefits given by the state. Physical removal reflects a call to explore 'the spatial linkages between the "*hurt and the hurter*"' (Waite 2009, 427). It is *physical* residents who walk or drive on the roads, or otherwise use a place's infrastructure. It is *physical* residents who require health services; whether they are permitted to use such services legally is another question, but this does not stop residents of all levels of membership from needing such services by having children, getting sick, and dying. It is *physical* residents who engage in 'acts of citizenship' (Isin 2009, 368), for example, lobbying politicians directly or participating in demonstrations that require

physical presence to produce 'an interruption and transformation of the political' (Nyers 2011, 141).[1] And it is *physical* residents whose lives prop up the lives of other residents: through legal work, undocumented work, child care, elderly care, and simple, daily interactions. In short, the *physical* residence of persons represents a key aspect of how our world is shaped and coloured, as does, of course, the physical removal of persons. As Bauböck has noted, a rethinking of public philosophies of citizenship lets us imagine that those who live in a place, and thus have a stake in the future of that place, are represented in the polity (2008). Thus, the permission to remain in one's physical place is perhaps paradoxically at the core of a concept of national assignment of privileges and benefits. 'Precarity of place' describes the absence of such permission and can be defined as *vulnerability to removal or deportation from one's physical location.*

Several caveats are necessary. First, in this article, removal and deportation is considered out of a national space, with national boundaries, but it is clear that the definition could be used to apply to other types of precarity of place. Here, to enrich our understanding of the term, we will focus solely on vulnerability to deportation from a country, by a national sovereign government. Second, this definition clearly suggests a continuum, on which citizenship sits on one end. On the other end is the noncitizen who lacks appropriate documentation and connections to safely remain. 'Appropriate' documentation is an important modifier, because, as noted by Goldring et al. (2009), the mere possession of documents is not sufficient to mitigate a precarious existence. Third, this definition, which speaks merely of physical location, may appear to be less than capacious, but that is precisely the point: as the subsequent empirical section will reveal, the simple fact of vulnerability to deportation and removal has wide-reaching implications, such as a fear of accessing public transportation, social spaces, and public offices.

Why precarity?

Thus precarity of place – vulnerability to removal from a country – deserves our attention. But why, if the concept of the precariat originated to describe precarious work, is it useful in this context? In other words, why not use a different term, such as insecurity, that does not focus primarily on labour? In sum, the two types of precarity share five compelling elements. These elements are (1) similar root causes; (2) the tightrope-like nature of both; (3) similarly ambiguous social and economic class identification; (4) varied methods of collective action; and (5) the importance of social networks to both. In this section, the two types of precarity are named as 'labour precarity' and 'precarity of place' in order to differentiate them.

First, the roots of both labour precarity and precarity of place are external, and, at their source, stem from the colonial legacy and neoliberal economic forces. Fantone suggests the link between colonialism and our current use of labour in exploitative and precarious ways (2007, 10). That is, colonialism's exploitation of people and resources created enduring imbalances in the global system whose consequence is consistent efforts by former colonial powers to maintain supremacy by reducing labour costs and devaluing labour rights, leading to a rejection of secure jobs and careers in many sectors. Likewise, neoliberalism's emphasis on capital and capital's need for low-cost workers produces precarious working conditions.

The hefty literature on the link between neoliberal economies, globalisation, and precarity will not be reviewed here; a fine summary by Arnold and Bongiovi notes:

> Global scale transitions and transformations shape the increasing precariousness of work.... The growing power and reach of global capital has exceeded the ability of nations and labor movements to regulate it, exacerbating inequality and precarious work. Numerous labor trends have been associated with neoliberal globalization, including a decline in attachment to employers, an increase in long-term unemployment, growth in perceived and real job insecurity, increasing nonstandard and contingent work, risk shifting from employers to employees, a lack of workplace safety, and an increase in work-based stress and harassment. The lack of public and private investment in skills and development is accompanied by a lack of access to schooling, where women and ethnic and racial minorities disproportionally bear the brunt of these disadvantages. (2013, 290)

Precarity of place is related to these same forces. The imbalances that both colonialism and neoliberalism have wrought, and the extreme movement of capital as part of the neoliberal agenda, have fuelled seasonal and temporary work, facilitating an 'economic logic' migrant labour (Sassen 2001, 34). As Standing has noted, 'capital welcomes migration because it brings low-cost malleable labour' (2011, 103). In fact Standing devotes considerable attention to explaining how undocumented migrants both fuel the neoliberal engine and are its primary victims. 'Too many (socioeconomic) interests benefit from an army of illegal migrants, and too many populists depict attempts at legalisation as eroding the security of the citizenry' (2011, 91). Put another way, the unequal flow of labour and capital across borders creates not only migrant populations, but the deprivation that underpins many of the world's current conflicts. As such, migrants of all kinds can be similarly made precarious by globalisation (Castles 2010). And it is widely known that colonialism lies at the root of many of the conflicts that have produced today's flows of forced migrants, most of whom lack appropriate documentation when they cross borders (Chimni 1998).

The second similarity refers to the tightrope-like nature of precarity, the anxiety of 'teetering on the edge' (Standing 2011, 20). Thus precarity is the condition of 'not quite, not yet'. That is, not quite poverty-stricken, not yet impoverished.[2] Similarly, precarity of place describes the condition of not quite homeless, not yet deported or detained. For many populations living in refugee camps, for example, a thatched roof above their heads suggests a physical shelter, but at the same time, the threat of deportation looms if authorities find something awry. With very limited recourse for legal protection, refugees such as these teeter on the edge: not quite forced to flee once again, not yet safe from scrutiny by host authorities. This teetering quality has both practical implications (e.g., difficult to plan the future) and psychological ones, and affects the kinds of choices that people make in everyday life. A broad swath of literature has asserted the profound psychological effects of uncertain understandings about our futures, in particular, the deeply damaging effects of indefinite detention (Silove and Steel 1998; Steel et al. 2006; Silove et al. 2007).

The third similarity that the two concepts of precarity share is the difficulty to identify its members with traditional understandings of class and status. Uncertain labour may fall mainly to low-skill and low-wage workers (Branch and Hanley 2011, 597), but it is also associated with other categories of insecure workers of varying skill-levels, such as skilled 'permatemps' in the food industry (Elcioglu 2010, 123) and artists (Bain and McLean 2013). This is why Standing has referred to the precariat as a 'class in the making' (2011, 7). Labour precarity describes those who are not necessarily part of the 'working class' or the 'proletariat' but instead includes both skilled workers struggling to find secure employment, on the one hand, and lower-skilled and inexperienced workers, on the

other hand. Similarly, migrants experiencing 'precarity of place' cross borders with a variety of skill sets, education, and experience. Reinforcing this, it has been noted that migration

> is formed by heterogeneous rather than unitary social networks, possessing distinct personal and social resources, having differential human and social capital, migrating under disparate circumstances, and expressing significant local, regional, political, cultural and religious differences. ... [Migrants thus often have] dissimilar political and economic opportunities and constraints. (Smith 1997, 243)

The two types of migrants that Abrahamson identifies – unskilled (who mostly find jobs in the service industry in global cities) and skilled (often those who have chosen exile from a restrictive country) (2004, 49) – offer a useful starting frame for dividing precarious populations, although this division requires further differentiation, because in both migrant and refugee populations, one finds skilled and unskilled populations. For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to note that precarity of place makes victims of all groups.

One of the implications of this heterogeneity of victims, as it were, is that collective action among mobilisers for both populations (those experiencing labour precarity and precarity of place) will take on forms informed by the motivations and needs of each, a point that has been made in the transnational social movement literature (Tarrow 2005; Brees 2010; Banki 2013). Labour precarity activists, as noted, have developed significant 'repertoires of contention' to make rights claims about wages, work safety, and employment stability (De Sario 2007). These can be colourful, playful affairs, laden with symbolism, such as the Chainworkers, an Italian activist group, who created San Precario, patron saint of the precariat, and took his effigy on tour throughout the country (Vanni and Tari 2005). Or it may be sombre demands for change. At the University of Sydney, sessional teachers working on short-term contracts set up a temporary, open-air office in the quadrangle to demonstrate the temporary, unresourced nature of their employment (http://www.nteu.org.au/blog/University-of-Sydney-39/tag/Mark%20in). Because migrants who leave countries with economic and political problems are often forced into situations of precarity, engaging in activism in the host country – to better one's rights where one lives, or to the place where one might return – has considerable appeal. But in the case of precarity of place, mobilisation is very much tied up with the political opportunity structures available in the host country (Tilly 1978; Burgerman 2001; Tarrow 2005).

Finally, there is an increasing recognition that social networks can serve to mitigate both labour precarity and precarity of place. Arnold, citing the Institute of Sustainable Development for the South of Vietnam (2009), argues that 'commune networks' of rural-urban migrants from the same area of the countryside facilitate trusting environments, allow people to share skills, experience, and material goods. Further, Legal Aid Centres in Vietnam have recognised the importance of such networks and are now seeking to deliver legal information through these networks (Arnold 2013, 481). Bain and McLean point to artists' collective social spaces in Canada to respond to marginalisation and insecurity (2013). Similarly, one of migrants' greatest protection against removal and detention is the knowledge and assistance of informal community networks (Banki 2006).

Empirical examination

In this section, the situation of migrants from Burma living in Thailand is examined through the lens of precarity of place. This population was chosen deliberately as an attempt to expand the precarity literature to non-citizen populations of the Global South. As will be clear, those vulnerable to deportation and removal from Thailand cannot easily be slotted into the 'undocumented' category. Indeed, they possess a range of statuses and types of documentation, which, while not the subject of this article, has been widely explored in both academic (Smith 1997; O'Kane 2007) and policy literature (Caouette and Pack 2002; Human Rights Watch 2004). Whether registered, in possession of refugee identification, or with no documentation whatsoever, migrants from Burma offer a clear example of how labour precarity and precarity of place are uneasily aligned.

Burma, also known as Myanmar, was a military dictatorship for four and a half decades, referred to as a 'pariah' nation by human rights organisations (Human Rights Watch 1999). In 2011, however, the country began a period of political and economic reform. A semi-civilian government, packed with former military serving as ministers, replaced military rule (Human Rights Watch 2012; International Crisis Group (ICG), 20). While the next general elections scheduled for 2015 present the possibility of a significant shift to a majority of seats held by the National League for Democracy (NLD), observers contend that obstacles for adequate representation of the range of interests and parties will remain (International Crisis Group (ICG), 20) There are heated debates about the genuineness of the reform (Altsean 2012; Lintner 2012; Selth 2012), but scholars concur that the changes are more than cosmetic (International Crisis Group (ICG), 20) While some internal changes are evident, those who left the country due to decades of political and economic instability have not returned to Burma. For these migrants, return to Burma is not yet on the horizon; structural faults of a political, economic, and social nature take a long time to repair even in the most optimistic of scenarios.

Today, there are an estimated 2 million undocumented migrants in Thailand from Burma (UNHCR 2013). This includes 83,033 refugees (TBC 2012, 8) – recognised by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) as 'displaced persons fleeing fighting' (Laungaramsri 2003). While the classic differentiation between migrants and refugees is meant to suggest that the refugees were forced to flee and the remainder moved willingly, in reality, data on the two populations have rarely reflected reality. In Thailand, for example, the figure mentioned above should not suggest that the 83,000 are the only ones in danger nor that the latter are simply seeking economic opportunity; they merely represent the ways in which the RTG and the international humanitarian community try to make sense of those populations experiencing precarity of place.

The refugee and migration literature is replete with discussions about the difficulty of differentiating between the two populations and the significant grey area in which most migrants fall (e.g., Castles 2004). This discussion will not be repeated here, except to say that Burmese migrants in Thailand very much follow the path of *mixed migration*, that is, the heterogeneity of migrant populations makes it impossible to tag an entire group with one set of experiences (e.g., Caouette and Pack 2002). Further, migrants come with mixed motivations that emerge at different temporal and spatial locations. It is thus difficult to identify one group with respect to the other. In this section, both populations are referred to as migrants, except where a differentiation in labelling is necessary.

Just as colonisation and globalisation play a role in creating the conditions that produce precarious work in Thailand (not the subject of this article, but see Arnold

(2005) for an excellent summary), so too do they produce precarity of place. Numerous analyses of Burma's dual struggles for independence and autonomy point to its colonial history and a poor transitional period as the source of the country's myriad ethnic rifts, emphasis on military power, and inability to heed the results of its 1990 election (Silverstein 1998; Lang 2002; Fink 2009). These occurrences have led to outflows of Burmese migrants and refugees for decades, first documented by border groups who noted ethnic minority populations fleeing across the border into Thailand as early as 1984 (TBBC 2004). Exacerbating these conditions, and leading to further undocumented migration across the Thai–Burmese border, are globalising forces in Southeast Asia that (1) attract Burmese migrants to work in Thai factories that produce for multinational corporations (Arnold and Bongiovi 2013); and (2) have opened the door for extractive industries to engage in exploitative labour in Burma, thus increasing outflows by those migrants fleeing human rights violations. For example, the Yadana gas pipeline, a project of French Total, US Chevron, Thai PTTEP, together with the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, has been extensively documented as contributing to widespread human rights violations, including forced labour, and subsequent migration from the country (Earthrights International 2009).

Migrants from Burma in Thailand come from a wide spectrum of social and economic class continua, just as, globally, the labour precariat do. Those with *education and skills* are the smaller group, and primarily comprised (1) refugees from urban areas of Burma with political leanings, who have worked as activists to effect change in Burma over the past 20 years; and (2) rural ethnic minorities from Burma who have been trained as medics or midwives or pharmaceutical assistants in camps or on the Thai–Burmese border by international aid organisations.[3] The former group, with excellent English and polished writing skills, and the recipients of myriad human rights/capacity building trainings (MacLean 2004; Egreteau 2012), are by and large dependent on overseas advocacy organisations to pay their salaries. As has been argued elsewhere, the 'logic of the activist' suggests that those with skills sometimes choose to remain gainfully and meaningfully employed, *even if it means they face precarity of place* (Banki, forthcoming 2013). Thus relatively well-paid job opportunities that mitigate labour precarity still present fearful challenges to living, residing, and communicating, placing the dangers of precarity of place in stark relief.

The presence of *unskilled* migrants in Thailand working in fishing and seafood processing, garment factories, construction, and as domestic workers is well documented, including both the legal challenges they face and the civil society organisations that have emerged to protect them (Arnold 2005; Pearson et al. 2006). Thailand's immigration policies for migrant workers has been equally well covered in the policy literature; since 1992 the RTG has formed and reformed policies (ad hoc at the start) to manage the inflow of unskilled workers (Chantavanich et al. 2007). Since then, registration programs to formalise the work of migrants, and subsequent criticisms of these programs, have come one after another. The earliest efforts to register migrants were called 'no more than a yearly relaxation of the immigration law' (Chantavanich et al. 2007, 5). The 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that the RTG signed with Burma (as well as Laos and Cambodia) to attempt to legalise workers began the process of ensuring both rights and obligations of legal workers, but implementation has been slow because of high registration fees and the presence of corrupt officials and employers (Human Rights Watch 2010, 72–78). Extensions of the deadlines have done little to quell the concern of potential registrants, who continue to fear threats of deportation (Schearf 2013). Most

relevant to this article, it has been noted that this registration process, even for those who   370
completed it, did not assure protection against arrest:

> A registered worker's status always remained *illegal, pending deportation* due to original
> irregular (i.e. illegal) entry, despite the legal permission to work, and restrictions on freedom
> of movement were extensively applied and extensive social protection denied to these work-
> ers. The cumbersome nature of registration processes has always ensured both workers and   375
> employers rely on unregulated brokers to formally register and this significantly results in
> debt bondage. (Hall 2012, 6) (italics in the original)

Thus registration that workers hoped would resolve their labour precarity appears to be of
little use in addressing the issue of precarity of place. The example clearly delineates the
difference between labour precarity and precarity of place, and the importance of differ-   380
entiating between the two. It also supports the contention that there are no 'bright
boundaries' between legality and illegality (Goldring et al. 2009, 256).

The precarity of place experienced by migrants from Burma has a tightrope-like
quality, in that migrants are still in residence, but living fearfully, and changing their
quotidian behaviour. A July 2013 raid in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for example, instilled fear   385
in migrants from Burma's Shan state in such a way that they stopped going to work and
avoided going out publicly. One ethnic Shan migrant noted that 'There is fear among
migrants as police check every day on all the streets' (Nyein 2013). The inability to be
mobile – to move from one place to another – is exactly what characterises those who
experience precarity of place. Because a modicum of safety is only plausible with no   390
movement outside the place of shelter, it is argued here that the element of mobility ought
to be vested with great significance. Thus, as an implicit corrective to our earlier definition
of precarity, we must also acknowledge that precarity of place occurs when one becomes
vulnerable to deportation simply because one moves from one place to another, or is
physically in a public space. Mobility, then, is deeply linked with precarity's 'teetering on   395
the edge' quality.

Related to mobility is the ability to mobilise. For Burmese migrants in Thailand,
precarity of place and its associated discontent provide the motivation for collective
action, but these are likely to vary based on what is permitted by the RTG. Following a
crackdown on public events like demonstrations in Thailand in 2000, the coordinator of   400
Altsean-Burma, a civil society organisation seeking to effect change in Burma, noted that
activists sought out other means to promote awareness about human rights violations in
Burma (such as low-key events, and the production of publications in English, Burmese
and ethnic languages) (AFP 2000). More recently, a migrant activist who writes about
continuing problems in Burma from inside Thailand noted that while the RTG knows of   405
his organisation's existence, his office could be 'raided at any time'. In order to remain in
Thailand, he noted, he changes the location of his office frequently.[4] For this migrant and
others who similarly engage in underground activism, precarity of place and precarity of
labour intersect, because activism provides employment. Thus, the balancing act of
locating safe spaces to live while also operationalising a human rights campaign is a   410
response to both kinds of precarity.

Finally, given that the threat of deportation to Burma is real, and that mobility is
restricted for those experiencing precarity of place, it comes as no surprise that networks
are critical for Burmese migrants. That migrant networks are an integral response to
precarity is intuitive as well as documented, and are often transnational in nature. Support   415
in the form of shelter, food, and other economic resources, as well as the sharing of

information on employment or government restrictions, is commonplace among Burmese migrants, as research on Karen refugees demonstrates (Brees 2010; Lee 2012). And scholars have noted that women migrants from Burma, for example, work through social networks to respond to trauma in transformative ways and use transnational advocacy to challenge notions of sovereignty in Southeast Asian nation states (O'Kane 2007). For migrants from Burma who have no documentation, networks allow the unmobile to sit tight when crackdowns arise. Networks cannot mitigate precarity entirely, but they can stop deportation in the short term. As one migrant noted, 'When the police are active, the others from Burma are the only thing that stand (sic) between me and the police. I can't leave my house, so they do it for me.'[5]

This section has grounded with empirical examples the theoretical assertion that labour precarity and 'precarity of place' are related, but separate phenomena. An examination of migrants from Burma in Thailand demonstrates that there is significant overlap between the two types of precarity, that they stem from similar sources (colonialism and neoliberalism), and that they produce similar kinds of differentiated victims, of varying skills levels. While both types of precarity have activist components, those experiencing 'precarity of place' also find themselves limited by host government restrictions that shape the modes and strategies of activist campaigns. And while networks are important for both types of precarity, and share some similar traits (e.g., sharing of information), in the former instance it is used to fight the structures that have imposed precarity, while in the latter, a more direct mitigation of precarity of place is attempted by networks.

This empirical examination has also laid bare the ways in which mobility and precarity are related. For the labour precariat, mobility becomes a tool by which employment can be obtained, a 'mode of subjectification' (Lorey 2010, 3) by which movement is required in order to remain on a teetering tightrope. For Burmese migrants experiencing precarity of place, however, mobility is a luxury that is dependent on the policies and practices of host governments or local officials. This confirms research on the ethnic Karen from Burma in Thailand, where mobility has the potential to unlock refugees from 'spatial incarceration' (Lee 2012, 266). While the relationship between precarity and mobility is intuitive, it is not well theorised. But the examples above make clear that mobility is so crucial to mitigating precarity that it ought to be accorded the same status as political economists give to development. Rather than Sen's suggestion that we consider *development as freedom* (1999), we might well consider *mobility as freedom*.

Conclusion

This theoretical and empirical examination of precarity has offered spatial and political counter concept to current understandings of precarity. The term 'precarity of place' focuses on the challenges of being migrants and the tightrope quality of noncitizen life. The article draws several parallels between the growing literature on 'labour precarity' and the term offered here, 'precarity of place', including its origins in colonialism and neoliberalism, its nebulous class quality, and social movement responses. While the article focuses on those displaced across national borders, the term may also be theoretically useful for other populations experiencing precarity of place: internal migrants, those displaced by climate change, or those dispossessed of their land. These populations, as well as others, are similarly vulnerable to removal and hence deserve consideration.

There are theoretical and practical implications of a clearly defined understanding of precarity of place. First, the term draws together the related literatures of precarity, forced migration, membership and denizenship, and, at this initial stage, notes not only the

human rights implications, but the basic quality of life issues associated with permission to reside. In theoretical terms, this is a valuable nexus that holds rich possibilities for exploration. Second, precarity of place acknowledges that the state's ability to remove individuals from their territory, while an important component of sovereignty, has the potential to develop a 'class' of individuals, whose needs and goals could directly challenge that very sovereign power. Third, the term suggests the importance of mobility as a necessary element of residence.

Further research is of course needed to explore the concept. Two suggestions are offered as a way forward: first, efforts to bring together the conceptual understandings of precarity – the existential, the labour-related, and precarity of place – would be most welcome in providing future theoretical avenues to grasp the difficulties of instability, uncertainly, and insecurity.

Second, further empirical research on migrants and refugees could better delve into questions of removal, *refoulement* (forced return) and detention – those who are subject to it, what responses have been, and these effects. There are of course studies that have begun this examination, but it is not systematic, and there is limited focus on the Global South. A cross-country or longitudinal study of precarity of place, establishing links between threats of removal and other quality of life issues, would be welcome and highly valuable.

Notes

1. In the political arena, physical absence can be manipulated by those who physically remain. Burman notes that in Montreal the names of arrested and deported activists continue to reverberate and circulate, and be 'memorized by opponents of secret trials and arbitrary state detention powers' (2006, 280).
2. I thank Sharni Chan for the term 'not quite, not yet'.
3. The number of Burmese skilled migrants has decreased rapidly in Thailand in the past few years, for two reasons: first, the process of resettlement, whereby a small group of countries of the Global North have agreed to move and offer citizenship to large portions of the camp refugee population, have drained the camps of their best educated and skilled residents (Banki and Lang, 2008). Second, recent changes in Burma have encouraged some, but not all, of the activists on the border to return to Burma to engage in Burmese civil society directly, from the inside (Naing, 2012).
4. Interview with ethnic Sgaw Karen male refugee activist, May 2013, via Skype.
5. Interview with female Burmese migrant, January 2013, Thailand.

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