(Im)mobile Precarity in the Asia-Pacific

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(Im)mobile Precarity in the Asia-Pacific

If on a global scale, our late-modern era is marked by intensifying mobilities of many kinds––of people, capital, media, commodities, information and more (Appadurai 1996; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Elliott and Urry 2010)—then Asia as a geo-cultural region exemplifies this trend in particularly forceful ways. In 2017, 41% of the world's international migrants were living in Asia, the largest proportion of any region. Globally, 106 million of 258 million migrants were born there, reflecting the biggest increase in outgoing migrant numbers of any region for the period 2000 to 2017 (United Nations 2017: 9). As well as voluntary migration, forced displacement is also significant: between 2016 and 2017, fuelled by the outflow of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar into neighbouring countries, the Asia-Pacific region saw its refugee population increase sharply (21%) to reach 4.2 million (UNHCR 2018: 13-14). Shorter-term forms of international human mobility, too, are increasing. East Asia and the Pacific recorded a more than threefold increase in tourist departures in the two decades to 2016 (up to 376 million), reflecting the expansion of the region's middle-class consumer base (World Bank 2018). Also reflecting the growth of Asia's mobile middle classes are increases in transnational educational mobility. In 2016, driven by massive growth in Chinese young people studying abroad, students from Asia represented the largest group of international students enrolled in tertiary programs worldwide (55% of international students in OECD nations) (OECD 2018). People are also increasingly travelling from and within Asia for temporary work, including contracted wage labour, volunteer work, and working holidaymaker schemes, the latter two types especially among youth.

During this same period, the cross-border mobility of media products, talents, and finances has intensified along with ubiquitous broadband connectivity, mobile media

technologies, and new transnational collaborations in media industries (Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016). Commodities and capital, too, are restless. When American and European industries shifted their manufacturing base into East Asia in the post-war period, this precipitated the region's first and second waves of intensive capitalist industrial development, first in Japan and then in the four "tiger economies" (Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan); it also deepened the region's articulation into transnational economic networks which had begun in earlier waves of European and Japanese colonisation. Today, China has taken over the role of global manufacturing hub and become the world's top goods exporter, and overall, levels of economic globalisation in East Asia and the Pacific, measured through transnational movements of trade and finance, stand above the world average (Gygli et al 2018).

Provoked to explore the implications of these intensifying mobilities in the region where we live and work, in 2015, the co-editors of this special issue developed a collaborative network between cultural studies researchers at the University of Melbourne, Hong Kong Baptist University, and the National University of Singapore to focus on topics connected with travel, migration, and transnational media between Asia and Australia.[i] This issue arises from that collaboration. Our starting point in developing the issue is the idea that the intensified mobilities sketched out above are transforming people's experiences of everyday life and subjectivity in Asia and beyond. The increased regionwide "mobilisation" of economic, social and cultural life seems likely to transform people's senses of place and movement; experiences of labour; everyday affective and embodied sense of self; gendered, sexed, raced and classed subjectivities; visual and media cultures; youth cultures; cultures of consumption, and more. This raises a plethora of theoretical and empirical questions for a regionally focussed cultural studies. How frictionless are these intensifying flows: which borders and blockages mould the new, transnational experiential geographies that are taking

shape? Which populations are advantaged by increased mobility, and which minoritised? What new inequalities emerge as a result of intensifying mobilities—and how do people live with, resist, and creatively negotiate these inequalities at the micro-level of everyday practice? And, as some within Asian area studies have also been asking: what will "Asia" come to mean in the emergent re-configurations of place, geography and identity being wrought by intensifying mobilities (Burgess 2004)? These are urgent questions for our time, but comparative works that chart common questions and problematics, and pose conjunctural questions for the future of Asian regional cultural studies, remain rare. This special issue tackles these questions. The papers that follow engage a wide range of inter-connected issues from a cultural studies perspective—from emergent youth ethics to worker empowerment to the affective tolls of migration and the ramifications of mobilities for women and ethnic minorities—in sites across an increasingly cross-linked geographic region encompassing South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Australia. We hope the collection will provide valuable new insights on how most productively to rethink the mobilities paradigm and conceptualise the cultural politics surrounding the ongoing reconfigurations of the Asia-Pacific today as a zone of intensive traffics, displacements, and realignments.

In order to lay the conceptual groundwork for the collection, this introductory essay begins by tracing out the interconnections between three of our key terms—(im)mobilities, precarities, and borders—in conversation with the relevant theoretical scholarship on these concepts across a range of disciplinary fields. This leads us to the formulation of a new key concept that articulates these connections: *(im)mobile precarity*. In the final section, we provide a thematic discussion of the essays that follow, presenting a broad overview and tracing some of the salient lines of connection between the essays.

(Im)mobilities

At the beginning of this essay, we recalled a body of work, self-styled as the mobilities paradigm, that proposes that human and non-human mobilities, rather than geographically defined societies, should be seen as the basis of social life in today's world (Sheller and Urry 2006, Urry 2007). Although it was scholars in sociology who nominated this proposal as a new paradigm, the centring of mobile rather than bounded geographies in the analysis of contemporary forms of human life draws centrally from insights across a number of other fields, especially anthropology (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997), and resonates strongly with work in cultural, media, and communication studies (e.g. Wark 1994; Tomlinson 2007) and cultural and human geography (e.g. Cresswell 2006; Massey 2007). Despite its defining emphasis on the ubiquity of human and non-human mobilities as a hallmark of late modern social life, however, inherent within the transdisciplinary field of mobilities studies is the acknowledgment that mobilities always exist in relation to forms of fixity and stasis. Illustrating this, in naming this emergent paradigm more than a decade ago, Mimi Sheller and John Urry underlined that:

> the new paradigm attempts to account for not only the quickening of liquidity within some realms but also the concomitant patterns of concentration that create zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility in other cases. (Sheller and Urry 2006: 210, 211)

This foundational exposition locates a critical interest in immobilities as among the key concerns of the newly named mobility paradigm. The recognition that capacities for movement are unevenly distributed, that access to mobility and connectivity for some relies on the stasis and disconnection of others, and that mobility and fixity may co-exist dialectically in the experience of individuals, is sometimes indicated by means of the use of hybrid terms: im/mobilities or (im)mobilities (e.g. Salazar and Smart 2011; McMorran 2015;

Robertson et al 2018). As Noel B. Salazar and Alan Smart observe in their reflection on the anthropology of (im)mobility:

> The movement of people may, and often does, create or reinforce difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing such differences. Despite overly general celebration and romanticisation, the ability to move […] is spread very unevenly within societies and across the planet. The world may be full of mobilities and complex interconnections; there are also huge numbers of people whose experience is marginal or excluded from these movements and links. (Salazar and Smart 2011: 3)

Relatedly, in migration studies research it is widely recognised that human mobility most often entails increases in risks as well as—sometimes, more than—opportunities. Cut off from the safety nets of home, relocated into unfamiliar and sometimes hostile social, cultural, industrial and institutional settings, and excluded from the protections of citizenship or permanent resident status, mobile people often find themselves subject to increased vulnerability as a result of geographic relocation. Obviously, this is particularly true for those whose movement is propelled by relative disadvantage: the asylum seeker, the guest-worker moving from a poor to a rich country, or the villager travelling to a distant megacity to perform low-skilled labour in a factory owned by a multinational corporation. But even relatively privileged migrants with high educational and social capital—like the mobile creative professionals considered in Chow's contribution (this issue)—may experience insecurity and dislocation as a result of their movement, albeit that these may tend to be more affective and psychological than political or structural.

Observing these and other ways in which migration often entails heightened vulnerability and risk has prompted some scholars to explore how human mobility can produce or exacerbate states of precarity (Waite 2009; Banki 2013; Bélanger and Tran Giang, 2013; Castillo 2015; Lewis et al 2015; Paret and Gleeson 2016; Piper and Lee 2016; Schierup and Jørgensen 2017; Deshingkar 2018; Dutta and Kaur-Gill 2018). It is to this concept that

we now turn, with a view first to defining precarity, and then to providing a critical consideration of how it might work in non-Euro-American contexts, and specifically in relation to human mobility. Consideration of the articulation between (im)mobility and precarity then leads us toward the formulation of our key concept, (im)mobile precarity.

Precarity

While a longer genealogy of the concept of precarity can be traced back through the thought of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and European labour activism in the early 2000s (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), the academic Anglophone engagement with the term came later, inspired most directly by British economist Guy Standing's 2011 book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (Standing 2011). In this work, Standing argues that the rise of neoliberal economics in the context of globalisation—entailing the rise of "flexible" labour, the disappearance of job security, the domination of social life by market logic, and the rollback of welfare provision by the state—has spawned an emerging social class defined by labour insecurity and personalised risk: the precariat. Standing's precariat concept challenges classical models of social class in at least two ways. First, it does so insofar as it encompasses heterogeneous groups of workers whose divergent degrees of social and educational capital would, in an earlier era, have entailed contrasting class statuses; for example, low-skilled manual labourers and temporary academic staff with PhDs, both now working on a short-term contractual basis. Second and relatedly, the precariat concept undoes Marxian understandings of class in a more structural sense as well, insofar as it implies that changes in historical conditions render classical class definitions outdated:

> The precariat was not part of the "working class" or the "proletariat." The latter terms
> suggest a society consisting mostly of workers in long-term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with
> established routes of advancement, subject to unionisation and collective agreements,
> with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers

whose names and features they were familiar with. [In contrast,] many entering the precariat would not know their employer or how many fellow employees they had or were likely to have in the future. They were also not "middle class," as they did not have a stable or predictable salary or the status and benefits that middle-class people were supposed to possess. (Standing 2011: 6)

The kind of precarity that Standing analyses, then, is first and foremost *economic and labour precarity* resulting from the social and economic changes attendant on neoliberalisation in post-industrial, Western European nations—although it has global ramifications as well, as Standing observes (2011: 26-58) (for example, in the impacts of transnational production chains, including in Asia; see also Kalleberg and Hewison 2013).[ii]

Alongside this work on the structural and historical conditions for the precariat's emergence, others have focussed on its affective dimensions. In Lauren Berlant's analysis, despite the fact that the precariat is a by-product of economic exploitation and state derogation of basic economic rights in the US, it does not experience its precarity affectively as dispossession. Rather, the peculiarity of the precariat is that its adaptive awareness produces affective and cultural shifts that have strange continuities with neoliberal ways of thinking and feeling. According to Berlant, the precariat is a "feeling class" (195) who witness inequality but "feel attached to the soft hierarchies of inequality to provide a sense of *their place in the world*" (194; emphasis hers). It is through this complex affective state that the precariat embraces precarity itself as its own condition of being and belonging (194). Berlant frames her conceptualization of the north American precariat's paradoxical attachment to its own conditions of exploitation around the notion of "cruel optimism": "a relation [… that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). While grounded in materialist accounts of the historical and economic conditions that give rise to precarity, the articles collected in this issue are particularly interested in precarity's affective implications for those living precarious lives.

Regardless of whether we focus on its affective implications or its structural basis, the term precariat is a concept that is grounded in the economic, regulatory, and social transformations that have remade the conditions of life and labour since the 1970s in post-industrialised, post-welfare states in the West. This makes it both strong—in its material specificity and undoubtable resonance in those contexts—and weak, insofar as the naming of precarity as a *global* condition based on these place-specific histories may risk Eurocentric over-generalisation. This latter charge has been levelled by a number of critics (Breman 2011; Munck 2013; Scully 2016). South African labour sociologist Ben Scully writes:

> as precarity has come to be analysed as a global phenomenon, there has been a tendency to employ a somewhat simplistic assumption of global convergence. While precarious work has been on the rise throughout the world, fundamental differences in the histories of work, and of workers, in the Global North and Global South should caution against viewing precarity as a universal phenomenon whose meanings and implications are cognate for workers everywhere. (Scully 2016: 161)

Scully argues that far from constituting a break with prior standards of stable employment and welfare provision, precarious labour conditions in the Global South have been deeply entrenched since the colonial era. By his own admission, though, Scully's proposal of "a" (singular) Southern model of precarious labour relations risks reproducing the very over-simplification he criticises in Standing (Scully 2011: 163). And in fact, aspects of labour conditions in some countries in the Global South *do*, strangely, resonate closely with western Europe's neoliberal present—especially perhaps in Asia's post-socialist states (China springs to mind, with the withdrawal of the state from welfare provision, the partial privatisation of state enterprises, and the marketisation of employment: Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016). Despite this, however, Scully's critique provides a valuable corrective to Standing's over-generalised theorisation of precarity as a newly global condition arising from neoliberalisation in the Global North.

Rather than assuming either that precarity rolls out from western Europe and the United States as a global tide, or that it is endemic to all of the societies composing some monolithic, postcolonial Global South, we might do better to think more concretely and specifically about "varieties of precarity" (Schierup and Jørgensen 2017: vii), or the varying "paths to precarity" that are traced in particular contexts. As Fran Martin and Tania Lewis have discussed elsewhere, drawing on Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande's discussion of cosmopolitan method (2010), this would mean:

> balanc[ing] the observation that, on one hand, late […] modernity sees nations and peoples linked across territorial borders to a hitherto unprecedented extent—including by the intensifying pressures and risks of the globalizing capitalist economy—with, on the other hand, an appreciation of the distinctive "paths to," and varieties of, modern structures and processes that are produced from specific geo-cultural contexts. (Martin and Lewis 2016: 17)

In other words, rather than assuming that precarity in Hong Kong, Dhaka and Melbourne will follow a predetermined global or regional template, we should attend instead to the local historical, cultural, economic and regulatory conditions that render lives precarious in specific contexts.[iii] For example, the employment insecurity faced today by youth in Hong Kong that may push them toward such alternative options as "voluntourists" or working holidaymakers abroad (Erni and Leung, this issue; Ho, this issue) are generated by economic stagnation that is common across the four Asian tiger economies and Japan. This is conditioned by these territories' shared trajectory of rapid post-war capitalist development, then slowing economic growth during the 1990s along with deindustrialisation, followed by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Chua 2016). Meanwhile in Dhaka, as Khan shows (this issue), the predatory mobility of global capital in the form of transnational fashion companies is fed by the relatively immobile precarious labour of female textile workers, conditioned by locally specific forms of patriarchal social and familial organisation.

Australian experiences of labour precarity are more closely comparable to those in western Europe and the USA at a structural level, given the nation's history as a welfare state and the prevalence of more secure employment patterns during the mid-twentieth century, which have since been eroded by economic neoliberalisation. However, if we add human mobility to the picture, and consider an imagined "Melbourne" as the desired destination of a refugee family arriving from across the Indian Ocean, as Caluya invites us to do (this issue), then a different kind of precarity comes into view in the family's encounter with an ever-more-fortified Asia-Australia border security regime. This is a "precarity of place": Susan Banki's term for the type of precarity experienced by noncitizens vulnerable to removal from a country (Banki 2013). Such detailed attention to the specificities of context, and how these shape experiences of (im)mobility and precarity in ways that cannot be predicted based on generalised global principles, is a defining feature of all of the articles in this issue.

As we noted briefly above, one specific way in which lives may become more precarious, in Asia as elsewhere, is as a result of geographic movement. Thus while Banki theorises "precarity of place" as a means of specifying noncitizens as a subset of the precariat (2013: 3), Lewis et al (2015) coin the term "hyper-precarity" to designate the labour experience of many migrants as the most exploited and insecure of workers, as a result of "the ongoing interplay of neoliberal labour markets and highly restrictive immigration regimes" (Lewis et al 2015: 582; see also Waite 2009)—a framing that resonates strongly with papers by Patterson (this issue) and Tam (this issue) on Filipina and Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong. As Marcel Paret and Shannon Gleeson argue:

> the migrant existence is often precarious in multiple, and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation. […T]he notion of precarity provides a useful point of analytical departure. Most importantly, it allows us to pose the question: *what makes*

migrant life precarious? The answer will vary across space and time, within particular historical moments, and between groups with varying characteristics. (Paret and Gleeson 2016: 281)

This emergent body of work on migrant precarity suggests that alongside the commonest extant understanding of precarity as referring principally to labour and economic precarity, the time is ripe to consider human mobility as another important aspect of experiences of precarity (see also Bélanger and Tran Giang, 2013; Castillo 2015; Piper and Lee 2016; Schierup and Jørgensen 2017; Deshingkar 2018; Dutta and Kaur-Gill 2018). It is this assumption that underlies our proposal of a term that articulates human (im)mobility and precarity: *(im)mobile precarity*.

To develop this connection further by linking back to our reflections above on (im)mobility: if human mobility may produce or exacerbate experiences of precarity, then precarity itself may in turn precipitate new states of immobilisation. Nothing could illustrate this cycle of (im)mobile precarity more sharply than the situation of the forcibly displaced person whose ocean-crossing journey as a refugee entails existential hyper-precarity of the acutest kind, only to end in years of punitive immobilisation in an immigration processing centre like those maintained by Australia on Manus Island, Nauru, Christmas Island and the Australian mainland. But a comparable cycle can be seen in more privileged populations, as well. Martin's research with middle-class Chinese international students in Australian cities provides one such example. These students' transnational journeys are intended to increase their professional employability in the medium and long term, but in the short term, when seeking work experience during study abroad, they find themselves corralled by a number of factors including racism and visa status into precarious, unskilled and underpaid employment, so that their experience of intensive mobility at a transnational level is interwoven with the experience of stuckness-in-place in the restaurants of Australia's Chinatowns (Martin 2017). While our proposed concept of (im)mobile precarity to describe such scenarios resonates

both with Banki's (2013) precarity of place and with Lewis et al's (2015) hyper-precarity, it is intended to encompass a wider field than either of these. It designates not only the precarity of migrants' labour experiences (Lewis et al 2015) and not only migrants' exclusion from national citizenship regimes and vulnerability to deportation (Banki 2013), but both of these together, and more broadly *the ways in which human trans-border mobility, including the various degrees, types and scales of immobilisation that usually attend it, tends to render people particularly susceptible to precarity across many registers, which may include existential, economic, labour, affective, social, and others*. As the above examples of refugees encountering national "border protection" systems, and educational migrants whose employment opportunities are curtailed by visa status indicate, central to experiences of (im)mobile precarity are territorial border regimes, to which we now turn.

Bordering

As the above discussion of (im)mobilities underlines, notwithstanding earlier outbreaks of theoretical delirium over globalisation's supposedly slick flows and placeless networks (Bude and Dürrschmidt 2010), mobilities are in reality never completely frictionless, but are always checked to some extent by governmental, institutional, technical and other forms of territorial bordering: immigration controls, stratification of migrants' socio-legal statuses, multilateral trade treaties, local media quotas, geoblocking of online content, and so on. That is, mobilities also produce and exacerbate borders, which produce friction and blockage as well as regulating flows. Those essays most concerned with territorial borders as a structuring aspect of (im)mobilities—Caluya and Tam in this special issue—share a conceptualisation of borders not as solid, pre-existing entities but rather as continually made and negotiated—asserted, contested, enforced, undone and remade—in the practices of state regulatory regimes and mobile people. Suvendrini Perera's (2009) conceptualisation of the

"borderscape" is helpful here. Based on her analysis of shifting territorial, temporal and symbolic borders around Australia in response to the arrival of asylum seeker boats from the nation's north, she focuses our attention on:

> the multilayered, intersecting, contradictory spaces of this unstable border zone. The relations between island-Australia and its outside(s)—those places that are, in one way or another, not-Australia—defy representation by a linear divide: the border. […] Australia's border both contracts—when outlying territories are excised for migration purposes—and expands, as the sovereign territory of other states is effectively annexed to serve as a detainment camp for asylum seekers. Both these projections and contractions of sovereignty are territorial assertions, acts that bring space under differential forms of hegemonic control, producing new borders that in turn give rise to multiple resistances, challenges, and counterclaims. This making and remaking of different forms of border space in the Pacific is what I describe as a *borderscape*. (Perera 2009: 57)

The never-finished border-making and border-contesting practices that constitute borderscapes in Perera's sense, then, are what we refer to as practices of *bordering*. They include the differential barriers to belonging produced by Hong Kong's border regime for foreign domestic workers (Patterson this issue; Tam this issue), and the intimate logics of Australia's border security regime (Caluya, this issue).

For many people fallen into precarity, one of the important signposts of belonging is still their desire and struggle for the right of abode. Increasingly, attempts to stabilize the concept of right of abode, or citizenship more broadly, in terms of birth rights, on the grounds of human rights, or by way of humanitarian impulse, have been shown to be inadequate, if not flawed (Erni, 2016). Works that bring citizenship studies and border studies together indeed have begun to search for some alternative political language to talk about border spaces and bordered people in a blurred zone, where it is hard to distinguish between who is in and who is out, between inclusion and exclusion. There is a decisive number of contemporary urban spaces and structures—especially slums, boarding spaces for migrant

workers, half-way shelters, processing centres for the newly arrived, temporary outposts to keep refugees rescued from boats, and so on—that reveal in their organisation and spatial ideology this logic of "indistinction." In response to this complex situation, some study immigration laws as an important site of struggle for interpretive clarity and biopolitical analysis (Fokstuen, 2003; Ku and Pun, 2004; Zartaloudis, 2013). Others take a more intensive theoretical interest to examine citizenship management by way of an imaginary of the borderscape (Perera) that is no longer about a multiverse of restricted citizenship and border control, but about a much more general social and spatial economy generating a strong sense of precarity of belonging as such, as a structure of felt, lived, and often feared reality (e.g. Balibar, 2003, 2010; Benhabib, 2004; Esposito, 2011). In this more theoretical vein, Giorgio Agamben's (1998) revision of Foucault's biopolitics by the postulation of "bare life" has become important across the varied debates over immigration and refugee issues. For Agamben, the conditions and practices of mobility and the politics of bare life are fused. And it is through Agamben that understanding the politics of indistinction (neither inclusion nor exclusion) becomes tantamount to enacting a new political understanding appropriate to the urgency posed by bare life. This is because to be caught in indistinction, or what John Erni (2016) calls "the politics of being included-out," is to be captured by bare life. Carl Schmitt, a major inspiration for Agamben, would have considered the included-out as a logical outcome of the state of exception, because it is only through exception that the included is simultaneously, exceptionally, excluded. Perhaps all of this is to assert that when bordering is intensified, people's structure of belonging appears to be in the shifting relations of difference and not in fixed positions, either teleologically or ontologically. Practices of bordering reveal that people's structure of belonging gains its meaning not through absolute and stable dichotomies of in and out.

Interestingly, there is value in thinking about a political structure of bordering that forgoes a fixed dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion, because it may help us to imagine a different kind of political community that exists not only in relation to migrants themselves as a community moving on and along the periphery but also in relation to a much broader spatialisation of urban citizenship writ large, encountering and encapsulating all kinds of edgy identities and movements in the undercurrents of urban life. To see borders in this way—as not only repressive but also generative of cultural life, including resistances, challenges, and counterclaims—resonates with the work of Sandro Mezzadro and Brett Neilson, who see borders "not merely [as] geographical margins or territorial edges […but as] complex social institutions, which are marked by tensions between practices of border reinforcement and border crossing" (Mezzadro and Neilson 2013: 3). Borderscapes, practices of territorial bordering, and the politics of indistinction, then, are central to the constitution of the forms of (im)mobile precarity that this special issue explores.

(Im)mobile precarities in context

Before we introduce each of the papers in this issue, we will first delineate some overarching themes that connect the papers and distinguish the collection as a whole. We have already noted, above, the first distinctive feature of these papers: rather than opting for global-level discussion or generalised theoretical analysis, they hone in on fine-grained case-studies of the *local specificities of precarity as a lived condition in particular contexts*. Precarity may be connected at the macro scale with global-level economic processes, but these papers show how its instances are specific to local histories, cultures, and economic and regulatory structures across Hong Kong, Australia, Bangladesh, and the mainland People's Republic of China. Second, the papers collectively highlight the *ambivalences of (im)mobility as a lived condition*: optimistic narratives of "personal growth" versus experiences of labour

exploitation among Hong Kong working holidaymakers abroad (Ho this issue); discourses of "women's empowerment" versus the machinations of predatory capital among "ethical fashion" garment workers in Bangladesh (Khan this issue); youthful aspiration versus neoliberal complicity in the case of Hong Kong's "voluntourists" (Erni and Leung this issue); the putative "freedom" of mobile creative labour versus the emotional toll of a life on the move (Chow this issue). Third and relatedly, many of the papers not only consider the regulatory and institutional shaping of (im)mobilities, but also bring a *micro-level focus on subjective experience*: attention to the positive and negative affects attendant on human mobilities—aspiration, loss, idealism, anxiety. Fourth, the subjectivities on which the authors focus belong to *marginal subjects*: each in very different ways, mobile youth, refugees, domestic workers, factory labourers and creative workers can be seen as peripheral to dominant structures of social and economic power and thus susceptible to (im)mobile precarity—of labour, of life, and of affect. Their modes of mobility are often complicated by the contradiction between a strong desire for movement and a lack of resources to realise that desire. Yet they *feel* the contradiction in specific ways, as they chart their precarious courses of drifting through different structures of marginalization enacted by national borders and work regimes. Finally, and unsurprisingly perhaps for a collection rooted in the (un)discipline of cultural studies, the papers deploy *mixed-method approaches incorporating ethnographic, institutional, and representational analyses* in order to produce a multi-perspectival picture of experiences of (im)mobile precarity in the Asia-Pacific today. Authors combine the use of original interviews to explore people's material, embodied and affective engagements with (im)mobility, precarity and bordering; critical investigation of bordering regimes embodied in governmental and legal structures that define the insides and outsides of national and territorial belonging; and analysis of representations, discursive regimes, and symbolic economies of mobility within public and media culture (such as documentary cinema,

journalism, government campaign materials, and fashion advertising). These mixed-method approaches, and especially the inclusion of an affective focus across several contributions and in-depth representational analyses in others, marks the humanities specificity of this collection, as distinct from the "harder" end of social science fields of sociology, political economy, migration studies, labour studies, and human geography, where, as we have seen, precarity and (im)mobility have also been the focus of much important research in recent years (e.g. Schierup and Jørgensen 2017; Robertson, Cheng and Yeoh 2018).

The Essays

John Erni and Daren Leung's contribution draws on the case study of volunteer tourism ("voluntourism") in Hong Kong's Voltra organisation to consider the politics of youth aspiration in a time of precarity. Although one might assume that young people engaging in volunteer tourism might be of relatively privileged class status, in fact, the authors note, many "Voltrateers" are young people whose advancement opportunities have been restricted by Hong Kong's economic decline, including students in non-award courses and unemployed and underemployed youth. The authors demonstrate how transnational mobility is idealised in Voltra publicity materials as beneficial for such youth, supposedly aiding their "personal growth" by turning them into global citizens. But rather that dismissing Voltrateering as simply an instance of neoliberal co-optation, Erni and Leung are concerned to tease out the potentially radical implications of the Hong Kong precariat's quest for "existential authenticity" through voluntourism, the entwinement of their cosmopolitan with their social-justice aspirations, and their implicit critique of late capitalist social and economic organisation through their engagements in this emergent type of hybrid mobility.

Louis Ho's essay considers a different hybrid youth mobility practice: the case of Hong Kong working holidaymakers (WHMs) in Australia. Combining policy analysis,

textual analysis of a range of representations of Hong Kong's Working Holiday scheme, and interviews with 50 WHMs, Ho explores the ways in which WHM policy shapes youth subjectivity. Picking up the romanticizing discourse of mobility as an aid to "personal growth" also noted in Erni and Leung's article, he shows how the WHMs' experiences of mobility are more complex than this formulation allows, compelling them to balance highly precarious and often exploitative labour conditions in Australia with aspirations toward living a meaningful life in future. Ho also observes how the liminal time of the WHM experience contributes to workers' experience of something like "emerging adulthood" as theorised by Jeffrey Arnett (2000): at once offering the chance to explore alternative value systems and life ideals, and curtailed by the definitional temporariness of the situation and the necessity ultimately to return and become absorbed into working life back home. Ultimately, then, for Ho, the WHM experience represents both a resistance to and an affirmation of mainstream late-capitalist values in Hong Kong.

In sharp contrast to the cosmopolitan imaginary of working holiday and voluntourism, in the first of three essays focussing centrally on practices of bordering, Gilbert Caluya turns to Australia's border security regime that incarcerates refugees arriving by boat in offshore "processing centres," in order to delineate a peculiar logic of intimacy. He analyses both pro-refugee and anti-refugee groups to show that they try to gain wider national sympathy for their political stance by encouraging the Australian public's identification or disidentification with refugees through intimacy. Caluya deploys an understanding of public hegemony mainly as an affective appeal to an aspirational national unity against outsiders. He asserts that pro-refugee and anti-refugee politics coexist in a hyper-diverse media landscape, vying not only for public attention, but also for public emotion and the sense of belonging to an uncomplicated collective. Whereas anti-refugee advocates demonize and dehumanize refugees as criminals and security threats, pro-refugee advocates tend to empathize with

refugees as vulnerable victims. Caluya writes, "Both sides draw on melodramatic, horror, sensationalist, sentimentalist and romantic conventions and tropes to drive home their affective politics." All in all, the sensationalist and sentimentalist portrayals of refugees as sexual perpetrators or sexual victims in media, government and political discourse produces a politics of differential compassion, privileging some refugees over others. Intimacy is then a key site of political contestation, including the generation of alternative bordering practices by mobilising feminine moral authority in networks of care. Caluya is hopeful that these alternative bordering practices can generate meaningful and material relationships with incarcerated refugees that might serve as the ground for a more transformative solidarity.

Daisy Tam's article complements Caluya's introduction to the precarity of space and the politics of intimacy around the nation-state border with a focus on the ethics of care. She examines foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong and how the various structures of border regimes such as state policies, rule of law and the discursive space of everyday life produce their exceptional presence in Hong Kong. She draws from Ghassan Hage's (2002) story-telling framework of alter-politics and Michel Serres' (2007) germinal theorisation of the parasite to revision these border discourses. Beginning with the etymology of the parasite as the being that eats alongside, she demonstrates the interdependent and reciprocal relationship between the parasite and its host. This metaphor allows her to reveal and recuperate the paradoxical status that shapes foreign domestic workers as both foreign and domestic. Further anchoring this paradox by examining their everyday practices of affective labour, she shows their constant oscillation inside and outside of the home and the state. Framing these discussions through the history of labour migration to Hong Kong and the globalisation of the care chain of intimate labour, and using poems, ethnography and media reporting, her analysis highlights (im)mobile precarity through this paradox. On the one hand, mobility is embodied through gendered and labour migration; on the other hand, immobility is enacted

through state and home enclosures that contain and make legible these women's statuses as foreign domestic workers. This frisson reveals how (im)mobile precarity is secured through the mobility of overseas work as well as the domestication of immigrant work practices. The metaphor of the parasite reveals this condition of precarity through the female worker's agency of mobility and therein her vulnerability to immobility.

Chris Patterson's article carries over themes of intimate politics and the mobile underclass while articulating bordering to sex-gender regimes as well as nation-state paradigms. Patterson examines two documentaries—*Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016) and *The Helper* (2017)—about female domestic workers in Hong Kong. He analyses the representation of these women against normative studies that construct them within a heteronormative vertical kinship structure, and draws on queer theory to reveal this structure's logics and limitations of race and gender. He highlights the documentaries' "queering" of these workers through their exploitation by poor working conditions and the provision of heterosexual belonging by reinforcing their roles as a surrogate live-in mothers. The concept of straight time (Halberstam 2005) frames this analysis to reinforce motherhood and reproduction, and deny other non-heteropatriarchal forms of social reproduction. Patterson further situates these women within the political and economic conditions of migrant work, and exposes their construction as queer and non-normative by questioning the biological essentialism of kinship. (Im)mobile precarity is demonstrated through the genre's humanitarian narrative and technology of "giving voice." The former produces the female migrant domestic worker as an emergency subject in need of rescue while the later domesticates her as a compliant worker by making her perform the matronly duties of maternal sacrifice. These women acquire recognition as racialised and gendered migrant subjects through the precarity of "gaining voice" from a narrative structure that celebrates the performance of their intimate care work.

Extending the critical attention given to the global underclass theme from Caluya, Tam, and Patterson, Khan adds the question of creative industries in her essay on the female textile workers in Bangladesh in "ethical fashion" industries. To Khan, what was often taken as new kinds of empowerment and mobility afforded to Asian garment workers through the discourse of the rise of creative, ethical entrepreneurship within the global garment industry, actually brings particular forms of instability and risk. She is sceptical about the claims made by creative industry scholars in Western contexts that while cultural labour often comes with economic uncertainty, it also promises personal fulfilment, flexibility and creative freedom. Using ethical fashion as an exemplary site through which to observe claims of "entrepreneurial freedom," Khan asks: can the textile producers in Bangladeshi handicraft enterprises be understood in the same way, as "creatives"? Khan pays attention to the flows of ethics, empowerment, and creative enterprise that circulate in and around South Asia through two case studies of ethical fashion brands in Bangladesh—Aarong and Bhalo—in order to demonstrate a profound point that transnational flows inherently produce particular kinds of "local." A paradoxical, disjunctive situation therefore arises in relation to women's work in South Asia. Khan concludes that in that context, "when women *are* defined as workers, as part of the supply chains of global garment production, they are treated as largely disposable." Even as practitioners and proponents of ethical fashion champion an alternative creative production chain, they are shadowed by the predatory mobility of global capital.

A different view of (im)mobile creative labour is presented in Yiu Fai Chow's paper on Hong Kong creative workers in Shanghai and Beijing. Informed by his interviews with twelve such workers, Chow focuses on the affective impacts of this type of labour mobility: experiences of moving and being moved. These creative workers' cross-border movements are spurred by the differential between their professional precarity in Hong Kong as a result of economic stagnation in that territory, and mainland China's still-growing economy hence

increased professional opportunities. Although both creative work—"doing what you love"— and professional cross-border mobility are often represented as epitomising freedom, choice, excitement and other positive values, Chow shows how the insecurity and disconnection of a mobile existence in fact often saturate these workers' experience with negative affects: loss, grief, anxiety, regret. Chow's interviewees emphasise how creative-class mobility fractures and disrupts interpersonal relationships in particular—especially between close relatives and friends—with deep consequences for the kind of (melancholic) subjectivity thereby produced.

In bringing together this diversity of approaches to mobility, immobility, and precarious life across this series of inter-linked sites in the Asia-Pacific, our hope is that this special issue illuminates aspects of the human experiences and cultural framings of movement that resonate not only in these particular contexts but also more broadly. For if mobilities can be understood as a defining characteristic of social life in the late modern world, then, as we hope the above discussions have illustrated, forms of immobilisation, precarity, and bordering are constitutively entangled with intensifying mobilities and so are equally defining of the world we share. Directing critical attention to these entanglements is an urgent project for cultural studies today, and one to which we hope this issue can make a useful preliminary contribution.

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Notes

[i] See the Asian Cultural Research Network website: https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/culture-communication/research/groups/asian-cultural-research-network.

[ii] This focus on labour precarity resulting from material changes to macroscale economic and social organisation since the 1970s is in distinction to an alternative approach, which frames precarity as a more general, existential condition in the context of global terrorism fears and other forms of everyday insecurity (e.g. Butler 2006; Ettlinger 2007). For our purposes, the more specific, labour-based definition is the most useful; but see discussion below on Berlant's affect-based approach to precarity (2011).

[iii] The articles collected in Kalleberg and Hewison's special issue (2013) are exemplary in this regard.