Making Precarious: The Construction of Precarity in Refugee and Migrant Discourse

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In popular media, and sometimes even in academia, people in movement across borders are described as "precarious"; their lives are precarious, their journeys are precarious, their existence is one of precarity. Yet, precarity is not—and never has been—an emergent property of people or their actions. Precarity is a function of the state. It is the state which defines precarity through policy, action (and inaction), and which inscribes that precarity onto those bodies it wishes to regulate. By attaching the label of precarity to migrants and refugees, rather than by describing the actions of states as "making precarious," discourse obfuscates the disciplinary and normative powers of the state, both at its borders and throughout its area of control. By examining the experiences of non-binary, queer, and trans migrants at Canadian points of entry, and through a critical examination of the literature surrounding the concept of precarity, this paper argues that state interactions with vulnerable people in motion across borders constitute a claims-making process by which bodies are a) made precarious, *and b)* made into objects for moral regulation and discipline. *Bodies in motion across borders are an empirical reality, but their precarity is constructed, reified by the state, and their existence subject to a normative discourse which paints them as threats to be regulated or repelled, or objects of humanitarian concern.*

Introduction

In early 2019, the Associated Press and other news organizations began to issue reports alleging that a new round of crackdowns targeting LGBTQ citizens and activists in Chechnya, a region already infamous for its so-called 'gay purges' (PBS 2019). The stories featured grim accounts of people imprisoned on suspicion of being gay, who were then subjected to intense interrogation and even torture; two men were alleged to have died as a result.

This was not the first time such purges had taken place in Chechnya. In 2017, LGBTQ activist groups and Amnesty International had reported on similar events, including imprisonment, torture and killings by state representatives as part of a wider social crackdown on what state officials called "deviant" behaviours (PBS 2019). In response, gay rights activists and organizations began to establish clandestine networks to smuggle queer,[1] non-binary and transgender people out of the region, and into the international refugee system, where they might find a chance at resettling in a friendlier environment. Groups like the Rainbow Railroad in Canada worked to move targeted people out of Chechnya and across borders to safety. The decision on the part of the group's founders to name it after the Underground Railroad was in many ways appropriate as, like the American network used to smuggle slaves to freedom, the Rainbow Railroad's intent was to help gender and sexual minorities to escape to freedom in Canada.

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The Chechnyan purges of LGBTQ citizens is hardly unique; out of 195 recognized nations, only 28 extend legal protections and rights to non-heterosexual citizens. For much of the world, heterosexuality is effectively compulsory, with violators liable to face fines, prison sentences and, in several states throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), death (The Human Dignity Trust 2019). In the face of such persecution, a growing number of non-heterosexual people opt to leave their homelands in search of safety. Included in this category of precarious traveller are transgender, queer, and non-binary/non-conforming refugees, who are among the most vulnerable of all (Affan 2019).

Yet successful flight from homophobia and transphobia is more difficult than simply fleeing one nation for another; as any number of international organizations will confirm, the journey of the refugee is a precarious one—the road of a queer, non-binary, or transgender refugee more precarious still. Refugees must pass through multiple layers of screening and vetting before arriving at a potential safe haven, and once they do, there is no guarantee that their new home will be any more tolerant than the one they left behind. For queer, non-binary and transgender refugees, the layers of precarity faced by virtue of their refugee status are compounded by additional layers of scrutiny—and, hence, precarity—as claims agents and border personnel are tasked with assessing if such claimants are "really queer" (Murray 2014).

These experiences highlight the ways that precarity is less of a static categorization of persons, and more of a series of processes—of claims and counter-claims—involving individuals, states, policy, and policy execution which intersect on and within the bodies of queer, non-binary and transgender refugees. These exchanges illustrate that issues of precarity—and indeed, of the very concept of precarity—is as much a question of sociology as it is any other discipline. Precarity is a process; people are not precarious, and they do not only experience precarity, but rather they are made precarious through interactions with others.

Data on the exact numbers of SOGIE[2] claimants processed by the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) each year can be difficult to come by, but what data is available indicates the numbers of claimants remains small. In 2015, the number of SOGIE claimants processed was 1,286, of which 883 were accepted and 372 were rejected (Figure 1) (Robertson 2017). While the overall numbers of trans, queer and non-conforming refugees crossing into Canada is relatively small, they nevertheless represent a category of claimant that is especially susceptible to shifts in refugee policy, or to shifting political or social attitudes. This is especially true when the basis for their claims for asylum—persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity—demand that they reveal aspects of themselves they may have spent a lifetime hiding.

This paper draws on the literature surrounding the experiences of queer, non-binary, and transgender refugees' experiences at the border to examine the ways that precarity as a concept and a process is socially constructed and grounded in the expression of biopower. While these refugees come from many nations, their experiences with the power of borders share similar characteristics; of being unrecognized; of being stereotyped, illegitimated, and challenged to prove their "queer *bona fides*" to border agents and other representatives of the various refugee systems of the Global North. Beyond the experiences of queer, non-binary and transgender refugees, this paper argues that *all* refugees are *made precarious* through their interactions with individuals, state policy and practice at the borderline. Further, this paper argues that the practice of ascribing the status of precarious to the bodies of refugees, rather than locating it in the praxis of border enforcement and refugee claims processing renders the biopower present in state/refugee interactions invisible.

The paper will provide a brief overview of some of the more common ways that precarity is deployed in policy and academic debates, before turning to a more focused examination of the use of the term with regards to refugee experiences. From this

| Disposition Type | Claim Types | SOGI Claims Finalized in 2015 | | | Withdrawn & Other | Grand Total | Acceptance Rate | Rejection Rate |
		Positive	Negative	Abandoned				
FIN	Bisexual	177	107	0	8	292	61%	37%
	Gay	481	177	5	12	675	71%	26%
	Lesbian	181	76	2	4	263	69%	29%
	Varied/Other	44	12	0	0	56	79%	21%
Total		883	372	7	24	1,286	69%	29%

Figure 1. IRB Data release: SOGIE and general claim decisions 2011-2015

point of departure, this paper will then discuss the sociology and biopower of precarity before moving finally to a re-conceptualization of precarity as an on-going process of claim and counter-claim, where claims agents' expectations about the "correct" way to "be queer" inform their recognition (and, hence, authentication) of queer refugees' identities and status. Throughout, this paper draws on testimonials obtained from advocacy groups, in-depth news reports, government statistics, and academic literature from the emerging field of transgender and queer studies.

The many (theoretical) faces of precarity

Precarity has long been an object of debate among academics of many disciplines, who have argued its precise meanings and import through successive waves of interest. In the early 2000s, precarity was theorized as a motivating factor for worker movements standing in opposition to the deregulation of markets and the heightened job insecurities that grew from the economic policies of late-stage capitalism (Lazzarato, 2004). Indeed, precarity was central to the organizational practices of movements such as Justice for Janitors (JfJ) which saw social activists pressure governments to regulate what they saw as the exploitation of undocumented and new immigrant workers in sub-contracted cleaning and maintenance jobs (Justice for Janitors 2018). In the case of JfJ and related movements, 'precarity' described the asymmetry of power relations in the relationship between individual employees and their respective employers which embedded the term firmly within the micro and meso levels of sociological analysis; precarity was an issue of small groups of people enduring unequal employment relationships at the sub-national, regional, and municipal levels.

Elsewhere, precarity has been used to categorize trans-boundary workers engaged in labour on temporary work permits and visas or through temporary foreign worker programs where job security is tenuous and the risk of abuse or exploitation by employers is high (McLaughlin and Hennebry 2013). As economic migrations by workers moving from the Global South to the Global North increased, concerns over their precarious working and living conditions kept precarity as a concept at the forefront of public and academic debates. In these cases, 'precarity' is a decidedly macro-level concept, used to describe the asymmetries of power relations between states, trans-boundary organizations, and the flows of economic migrants moving across territorial boundaries in search of work (Neilson and Rossiter 2008).

Yet precarity is also a workhorse for researchers concerned with the experiences of refugees and other displaced peoples, whose very existence is one of uncertainty and risk (Malkki 1996). In this discursive space, precarity is both a descriptive as well as normative condition of the refugee. Precarity is descriptive when it is employed as part of an analysis of refugee relationships with the various apparatuses that control their movement through states, such as when researchers describe the various institutional steps vulnerable refugees or migrants must take to navigate the layers of bureaucracy that stand between them and entry to a state (Ilcan, Rygiel and Baban 2018). Precarity is normative however, when it is employed by various stakeholder groups as part of framing strategies designed to tell observers what they ought to think about refugee claims. For example, when flows of refugees fleeing political violence and war in Syria fled across the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety, many liberal media outlets within the United States emphasized the precarity of refugees in terms of their helplessness in the face of external factors outside their control; refugees' precarity was used to invoke sympathy and to frame their journey as an example of a humanitarian crisis in desperate need of action (Tharoor 2015). Yet at the same time, stories from conservative-leaning outlets framed the precarity of the refugees in terms of threats to stability and the rule of law in the countries they were fleeing to. As part of their own coverage of the crisis, the conservative *Washington Times* released opinion pieces and news articles describing Syrian refugees as potential vectors for terrorism, violence, and a potential threat to American values (Richardson 2015).

In each of these articulations, precarity is as much a discussion of power as it is of individual circumstance or historical context. While precarity is used in discussions at all levels of analysis (from supra-state, state, and sub-state flows of people to regional, local, and individual relationships between employers, employees and the law), precarity is nearly always a species of claims-making between stakeholders in systems of power, regulation, and discipline. Nowhere is this more evident than in the regulation—and disciplining—of refugees and migrants whose identities fall outside of the normative boundaries of "typical" or indeed "normal" border crossers. As states make ever-increasing use of biometric forms of identification, they simultaneously center the practice of making precarity within the bodies of people; precarity in effect becomes a discourse about power relations between states, international migrant and refugee organizations, and the bodies of those caught up between them.

The sociology (and biopower) of precarity

When scholars and policy makers debate precarity—are flows of people "refugees" (thus deserving

of protections) or "migrants" (and thus subject to standard border controls)—there is often an unspoken heteronormativity and cis-normativity to the debates. Refugees are often depicted in media narratives as cisgender men, women, or traditionally constructed family units (Lee, Jin and Brotman 2011). This pattern obscures smaller groups of refugees whose identities place them outside of these parameters. This invisibility increases their risk and represents an additional layer of uncertainty to the processing of their claims (Lee, Jin and Brotman 2011) More than that however, the obfuscation of non-conforming refugees can often make it more difficult for domestic audiences viewing refugees through the lens of media coverage to identify and sympathize with them.

Flows of refugees and migrants are large and faceless unless and until attention is paid to specific examples of individuals whose stories are publicized and expanded as a sort of placeholder for the stories of all the others who travel with them (Cole 2017). When refugees in their tens of thousands made the harrowing journey across the Mediterranean in flimsy rafts and inflatable zodiacs, they remained undifferentiated in their Otherness until one of them—a small boy named Alan Kurdi—washed ashore after drowning and they became relatable as sons and mothers and fathers and daughters like any other (Figure 2) (Bouckaert, 2015). Through this child's tragic death, observers were asked to think of themselves as parents and thereby take on the normative role of parent as a way of tapping into the compassion and empathy that can be so diffi-

Figure 2. Obtained from Twitter

cult to authentically summon for such large flows of people (Cole 2017).

Yet these appeals highlight the challenges faced by refugees and migrants whose identities or bodies do not reflect the heterosexual and cisnormative framings of traditional appeals to sympathy or compassion. Instead, transgender, queer, and non-binary refugees remain invisible (Jordan 2009), their identities absent in calls by refugee aid organizations or activists to role-play kinship. In place of direct appeals to family (or parental) identification ("This could be your daughter, your father, your sibling..."), many aid organizations instead draw on appeals to "universal" human experiences—loving someone and being loved; wishing to live openly with your partner; simply wanting to live authentically (Rainbow Railroad 2019). Paradoxically, the appeal to "universal" desires highlights the non-universality of the experiences of transgender, queer, and non-binary refugees. Through such differences in experience we can discern the role that *differentiation* plays in the construction of multiple layers of precarity that intersect within queer, trans, and non-binary bodies as they move through larger refugee flows, and especially when attempting to cross the biometric borders of the state.

When queer, trans, and non-binary refugees arrive at ports of entry in Canada, the United States, or other nations of the Global North, they are met not merely with the apparatuses of biometric control: facial recognition devices, backscatter and traditional body-scanning devices, fingerprint and retinal scanners. Indeed, such devices are less crucial to the discursive processes of biopower than the conditions of *expectation, recognition/credibility* and *respectability*, which serve to "authenticate" a refugee claimant or migrant's precarity-identity far more than matching a name and face to a passport.

Trans, queer, and non-binary identities are not unknown to border agents in the Global North; indeed, agents are often instructed to view such persons as vulnerable (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2017). Yet this knowledge is not value neutral. The identity categories recognized under Canadian law are constructed categories. In Canadian society for instance, gender as a concept is still largely articulated in binary terms; to be transgender or non-binary is constructed in resistance to traditional understandings of masculine and feminine, and this articulation informs the *expectations* of border agents tasked with processing refugee claims (Cantú 2009). Being a refugee is precarious enough, but it can be compounded by the double-threat of having one's status as a precarious person itself rendered precarious due to possible "discrepancies" between an agent's expectations about a refugee's identity and the

facts of their lived experiences. Agents may expect trans, queer or non-binary persons to behave in certain ways, or to have experienced a certain kind of discrimination, and if they haven't, their claim to the status and protections of being a refugee are in question (Berg and Millbank 2009).

In such cases, the precarity of the refugee exists not as a property of their irregular border crossing (their irregularity is precisely what affords them protections under international law) but rather as a process of identification and interpretation by the border agents tasked with handling their cases. If a refugee is not what an agent expects, if their gender or sexual performativities differ from the homonormative constructions of queerness or homosexuality in Canada, their "realness" as a queer, non-binary or transgender refugee might be called into question (Murray 2014). These challenges can be compounded by the often uneven application of protections that, while ostensibly guaranteed by law, are sometimes not extended to the refugee in fact. For example, while refugees entering Canada may apply for protections based on their sexual orientation or identification (i.e. based upon a claim of persecution in the claimants' home country for orientation or identity), they may face the challenge of proving that homophobia in their home country rises to the level of 'persecution' according to Canadian standards (Hersh 2017). In the case of an Angolan man named 'Sebastaio', whose appeal for refugee status was rejected by Canadian authorities, the rejection was due to a ruling by the Refugee Appeal Division of the Immigration and Refugee Board which stated that Sebastaio's attempts to show persecution in his native Angola were in fact merely examples of 'harassment' (Hersh 2017). The decision used a lack of documentation of persecution rather than an absence of evidence of persecution as the basis for its decision; Sebastaio's claim was denied because Angola did not appear to accurately record instances of social—and state—persecution against this vulnerable minority group.

Entry controls at border crossings are not and have never been value-neutral in their construction or application. In the Canadian context, immigration regulation has long been concerned with the moral regulation of potential immigrants; in the early half of the 20th Century, potential immigrants were screened for "moral turpitude" as well as for diseases and criminality (Chan 2005). In the 21st Century, immigrants are still expected to possess "good character" (Chan 2005), but for queer, non-binary and transgender refugees, displaying good character—while also "proving" they are "really queer" (Murray 2014)—often necessitates engaging in performances of respectability to prove that a) they really are the gender or sexual identity they claim to be, and b) that identity is "normal" or

otherwise palatable to Canadian society (Seidman 2001). This pattern of "respectability politics" represents another vector by which queer, non-binary and transgender refugees are made precarious; expressions of sexual and gender identity and orientation are often highly individual and play or resistance to norms is often a part of that (Berg and Millbank 2009). When crossing borders as refugees, queer, non-binary and transgender claimants are in effect expected to not only "perform" their identities on demand (which can be traumatic for people who have just arrived from regions where open performances of that sort might result in arrest or other forms of violence), they are also expected to get them "right" (Cory 2018), according to cultural expectations of sexuality or gender identity of which they may be unaware.

If, after attempting to live and act openly according to host-country expectations of gender and sexual identity and attempting to show one's identity to be both within the expected parameters and "respectable," a person fails to convince an adjudicator of their "realness," their status as a refugee might be revoked. The removal of recognition of gender or sexual identity by border agents represents a third vector of precarity that has less to do with the refugee than it does with the cultural and social values, beliefs, and expectations of their interlocutors. Further, this added layer of precarity is ironic, given that the sexual and gender identity of the claimant is precisely what is supposed to be protected under Canadian law (to say nothing of international conventions). The difficulties of recognition represent a challenge to queer, non-binary and transgender refugee claimants that does not exist for other categories of refugees. When a religious refugee seeks admittance, how do they prove their religious *bona fides*? A curious investigator could discuss their faith with them or seek confirmation from local faith-based organizations such as churches or mosques. They may discuss a claimants' religious history—their attendance to rites or rituals, their piety or their fastidiousness in keeping the holy days of their faith (Kagan 2010). But how does an adjudicator test the "queerness" of a claimant?

Gender and sexual identity are intensely personal, and in many cases, the "evidence" of a person's gender or sexual identity exists nowhere outside of the bedroom or the confines of their own minds. To formally recognize a person's identity, an adjudicator will often fall back on folk knowledge of queer "practices" or identities (Seidman 2014). Rather than experiencing precarity as a component of their flight towards safety, queer, non-binary and transgender refugees are made precarious by social and cultural constructions along the borders of their potential refuges.

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Making precarious

There is a tendency in literature surrounding international migrations to refer to refugees as "the precariat" (Banki 2013), or to frame their experiences in terms of rational-choice logics that imply precarity emerges from refugees' deliberate choices to cross national boundaries or undertake dangerous journeys by land or sea. It is certainly true that perilous crossings of the Mediterranean or overland routes from North Africa, the Middle East or Latin America feature precarity as part of the journey; risky journeys are precarious journeys. Yet, this precarity of circumstance is less relevant to refugee experiences than the process of *making precarious*. Not all refugees undertake dangerous journeys from active conflict zones or regions of political repression; some grew up in static refugee camps where their status as "precarious" was the result of policies that *made* their existences precarious. Just as citizenship or non-citizenship are statuses that result from active political processes, the precarity that sexual and gender minority groups face as they move through the refugee system in countries of the Global North is a process of recognition, expectation and challenge. The precarity of sexual and gender minorities is multilayered, formed of "precarities of place" (Banki 2013), as well as through sustained interactions with border and refugee agents whose constant approval—and recognition—is a required element for continuing to benefit from the protections of refugee law.

In such cases, precarity is not institutional, legal, or geographic; it is cultural. Cultural precarity exists where the beliefs and identities of "atypical" (non-heteronormative or Othered) refugees encounter the complex matrices of border agent beliefs, practices, norms and values. In these spaces, there is no war forcing refugees to flee, no perilous crossings over dark and stormy waters; there is only the border agent and the cultural systems they represent. There is only the refugee's identity and the fear that it will not map onto the cultural expectations of the person charged with assessing their claim. Cultural precarity is not an emergent property of refugee bodies in motion but the manifestation of biopower and the ability to regulate bodies moving through their interactions with border agents. Cultural precarity makes refugees claiming persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity face a terrible possibility: not that their claims as refugees based on their belonging to a persecuted identity will be rejected, but that their identities will not be recognized at all. In an interview with refugees detailing their experiences within the Canadian refugee system, one claimant related their fears about their identity being rejected by a border agent:

"I come from Arab country and I also have history of military services so it was one of the things. It was like oh God, you know, first of all, you not going to believe that is me on the passport, you know, because I look quite different then I do in my passport photograph ... And I said you know I'm transsexual man..." (Envisioning: Global LGBT Human Rights, 2015)

The ambiguity and instability present in many queer, trans, and non-conforming refugee identities presents an additional layer of uncertainty to virtually every interaction they have, as in addition to proving the validity of their claims of persecution, they must also prove their identities are valid. To obtain this level of verification, SOGIE refugees are required to provide documentation that 'proves' to agents the truth of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Such proof includes medical files, testimonials, and other documents that may not merely be difficult, but impossible to access—particularly if the country they are fleeing from does not recognize the existence of non-conforming gender identities or outright criminalized non-heterosexual orientations (Envsioning: Global LGBT Human Rights 2015). Even if such documentation could be obtained, there is no guarantee that it would be understood or accepted by the agents in charge of deciding refugee claims.

Summary

The precarity of queer, non-binary and transgender refugees is not a static label, nor is it solely involved with the specific act of fleeing conflict or persecution, though it is involved with both. Precarity in this context is a process that emerges from sustained interactions between border agents, refugee claims adjudicators, and the claimants themselves and when this interactional element is overlooked or obfuscated, it conceals the very real power relations present. When gender or sexual identity is deployed in refugee claims or in the categorization of the types of claims an individual refugee is making, it highlights the ways that national and international legal traditions and protections are inscribed on bodies, which are then subject to interpretation and recognition by individual agents whose understandings of non-binary bodies and identities are often informed more by culture than by policy. What emerges from these interactions is an understanding of precarity as a process of "making precarious" whereby an agent's beliefs, values, expectations, and moral framings (their culture, in other words) establishes the context through which non-binary bodies must move as they seek recognition and safety.

In effect, transgender, queer, and non-conforming

refugees are often faced with multiple layers of challenges that other categories of refugees are not. Transgender, queer, and non-conforming refugees face immense challenges navigating the physical dangers of unregulated movement across borders, only to find a lack of protections—even predation—in refugee camps. Worse, even if their claims are logged and they are able to present their case to claims agents of a state like Canada, they are often required to "prove" their "queerness," a process which relies heavily on the reviewing agent's beliefs about what "being queer" actually means. If a refugee cannot sufficiently prove to a (presumed cisgender, heterosexual) claims agent that they are in fact, "really queer" (Murray 2014). They may find their claims denied, even if their gender identity or sexual orientation are ostensibly protected by international agreements. Understood this way, precarity as a concept is seen not as a component of a person's identity or experiences, but rather as something inscribed on to them by the state.

When precarity is externalized by the state and attached to refugee flows as though it were an emergent property of "atypical" movement across borders, it obfuscates the power relations through which states and international agencies render some bodies precarious. Precarity does not flow from the movement of refugees across borders; it is imposed upon them by states who seek to regulate, validate, or otherwise control bodies in motion.

Notes

1 The use of the term "queer" in this paper reflects the author's discomfort with the more common use of acronyms to describe gender and sexual non-conformity. As public awareness—and acceptance—of non-binary identities has grown, the acronym has grown as well, from LGB to LGBT to LGBTQ and LGBTQA, LGBTQI and others. For some, the identities contained within the acronym might represent the list of "recognized" identities, which imposes a form of categorization—and separation—of identities that may not necessarily exist in practice. By refraining from using this acronym and choosing instead to use "queer," "transgender," and "non-binary," the author is adopting the position that queerness and non-conformity—and indeed "trans-ness"—do a much better job of incorporating ambiguity, resistance to categorization, and play than the more rigidly constructed acronym. This is a debatable position to take, as categorizations can—and do—provide others with a sense of stability and belonging, but it is not the author's intention to engage in this debate here.

2 Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression—the term used by the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board to refer to gender and sexual minority claimants.

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