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The Paradoxes of Precarity: Buffalo Refugees Reconsidered

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[Post 21. Arabella Lyon: The Paradoxes of Precarity: Buffalo Refugees Reconsidered](#)



Buffalo, NY, photo by Shamir Hunley on [Unsplash](#).

Blog Author: [Arabella Lyon, PhD](#), Professor Emerita, Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies

Introduction: Some legal scholars have responded to the liberal, autonomous subject by theorizing a vulnerable subject. In doing so, they recognize vulnerability as a universal and constant characteristic of the human condition. Alternatively, many humanists use a different conceptual frame which follows Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness as universal human vulnerability and the political state of precarity. Precarity is a useful critical tool because the rhetorical constructions of precarity demonstrate how activists and politicians create worldviews and assemble publics. Political cultures construct precarity, shifting the precarity of different people fluidly. On what days does the precarity of Afghan women exceed that of US soldiers? In an earlier study of the discourses surrounding Buffalo's refugees, I suggest that precarity is often denied or ignored, not just because people wish to be competent, but because dominant discourses obscure our ability to recognize precarity and its causes. Over a decade ago, Buffalo media occasionally worried about the precarity of refugees and their economic cost to the county. Now, it reports that refugees have stabilized the city's shrinking population, revitalized the city's West Side, and provided an international economic network.

The Paradoxes of Precarity: Buffalo Refugees Reconsidered

Blog Author: [Arabella Lyon, PhD](#), Professor Emerita, Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies

Keywords: Refugee, Precarity, Neo-liberalism, Politics, Rhetoric, Humanists, Buffalo, Media, Economic Development, Multiculturalism.

Some legal scholars have responded to the liberal, autonomous subject by theorizing a vulnerable subject. In doing so, they recognize vulnerability as a universal and constant characteristic of the human condition.^[i] Alternatively, many humanists use a different conceptual frame which follows Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness as universal human vulnerability and the political state of precarity.^[ii] Precarity is a useful critical tool because the rhetorical constructions of precarity demonstrate how activists and politicians create worldviews and assemble publics.^[iii] Political cultures construct precarity, shifting the precarity of different people fluidly. On what days does the precarity of Afghan women exceed that of US soldiers?

In an earlier study of the discourses surrounding Buffalo's refugees, I suggest that precarity is often denied or ignored, not just because people wish to be competent, but because dominant discourses obscure our ability to recognize precarity and its causes.^[iv] Over a decade ago, Buffalo media occasionally worried about the precarity of refugees and their economic cost to the county. Now, it reports that refugees have stabilized the city's shrinking population, revitalized the city's West Side, and provided an international economic network. For example, in a 2016 *Buffalo News* editorial, Michael Weiner, the president of the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County, observed that Buffalo has gained from refugee entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, global connection, addition to the tax base, reversing population decline, and replenishing the 19 to 44 year old demographic. Tracking recent immigration on Buffalo's West Side, University at Buffalo sociologists Robert M. Adelman, Watoii Rabii, and Aysegul Balta Ozgen also observe that community organizations and local media both emphasize trends in housing and economic development, entrepreneurialism, and multiculturalism.

U.S. citizens are often celebrated as self-reliant and entrepreneurial; alternatively, refugees are characterized as precarious. In reversing these common places and denying the precarious lives of refugees, the Buffalo media creates a number of paradoxes. By denying precarity to refugees and constructing them as neoliberal subjects, it offers them a more secure place in the city, including them in an imagined community and representing them as active contributors. When the refugees are re-purposed as arriving to save the U.S. city, their precarity remains unrecognized, even unrecognizable, while the economic precarity of Buffalo is acknowledged. Neoliberal representations of refugees implicitly suggest that the Buffalo economy needs to be saved by geopolitical actions outside the U.S. borders. In characterizing forced migration as a source of development, the representations omit the failures of U.S. economic policies, here and abroad. Instead, they rearticulate the failures as opportunities, just not opportunities for long-term residents.

The representation of refugees as saving precarious U.S. cities—once revealed and analyzed—disrupts the stability of neoliberal discourses and opens new possibilities for critical responses. If refugees become “We the People” through neoliberal imaginings, the usefulness of

that rhetorical strategy is worthy of attention, but glib inclusion—even if it facilitates politics—is not in the service of a new politics. Rather, it diverts attention from failed economic histories and the struggles of precarity. A more liberatory strategy would be to link the precarious lives of both refugees and the long-time residents through an explicit acknowledgment of the cost of global capitalism. Both refugees and long-time residents share a common, if not universal, human vulnerability to failed economies. The paradoxes of precarity can be productive in disrupting cultural monologues and mono-logics and expanding possible responses; paradoxes can disrupt single answers and push us to struggle over meaning. For this reason, I have come to see precarity as a key critical lens for revealing cultural conflicts, creating deliberative or political moments, and calling forth citizen response.

Please see Journey's End Film Festival, occurring in February, as a local fundraiser for Buffalo refugees, [here](#).

Please see UB's video project highlighting Buffalo refugees, [here](#).

Notes

[i] For an introduction, see Emory University's Vulnerability and the Human Condition [website](#).

[ii] Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

[iii] Katie Oliviero is articulate on this. See her *Vulnerability Politics: The Uses and Abuses of Precarity in Political Debate*. New York: New York UP, 2018.

[iv] Lyon, Arabella. "Reversals of Precarity: Rewriting Refugees as Neoliberal Subjects." *Precarious Rhetorics*. Ed. Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston. Columbus: Ohio State UP. 2018. 125-45.