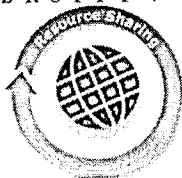


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CHAPTER 6

Reversals of Precarity

Rewriting Buffalo's Refugees as Neoliberal Subjects

ARABELLA LYON

"Our country has a lot to learn from this 'City of Good Neighbors.'"

—Samantha Power, U.S. ambassador to the UN (qtd. in Zremski, "UN Ambassador")

SINCE 1951, first in the UN Convention and then in the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act 208(a), a refugee is defined by persecution, well-founded fears, and an unwillingness or inability to return home. By legal and state-sanctioned definition, refugees' lives move from the human condition of precariousness to precarity, a move that Judith Butler characterizes as a shift from a primary human vulnerability to the political and hence contingent state of precarity. As she observes, "precarity designates the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames* 25, *Notes* 33). By international precedent, precarity marks a refugee's position in failed networks and the resulting exposure to violence. Butler also recognizes the violence inherent in *designating* another's precarity, as it offers a fantasy of mastery as it denies the vulnerability of all bodily life. Against the dangers inherent in precarity, she considers the potential of precarity as a concept that "cuts across identity categories . . . thus forming the basis for an alliance focused on opposition to state violence" (*Frames* 32). Since it focuses on "differential subject formation" and "differential distributions," she argues that precarity has the potential to create a different type of political coalition, one that would *not* require "agreement on all questions of desire or belief or self-identification" (32). Rather radical alliances might be founded on difference and evade the maps of identity politics and multicul-

turalism. In Butler's reckoning, precarity has the potential to violate and to liberate.

In my investigation of refugee rhetoric in Buffalo, New York, I employ Butler's robust, decade-long analyses of precariousness or vulnerability, precarity, and political agency. Her foundation offers a lens for examining why the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, among others, would praise one city, Buffalo, as offering a model program for refugees (see epigraph). Still, in following Butler, I worry that she is not consistent in her distinctions, sometimes conflating vulnerability with precariousness (Mills 45, 48–49). Butler herself writes that “precariousness and precarity are intersecting concepts” (*Frames* 25). Not to deny the generative aspects of Butler's blurred vocabulary, but to be more precise, I engage Erinn Gilson's concept of epistemic vulnerability, a form of precariousness essential to identity formation. Building from Butler, Gilson draws out three definitions of vulnerability. The common understanding of vulnerability, for instance in normative rights projects, minimizes the qualities of vulnerability as it emphasizes harm and injury (309–10). Vulnerability indicating hurt and grievance can be considered a negative, a political or socioeconomic *lack* that characterizes oppressed and marginalized people. In response, Gilson extensively reviews the literature that supports a second sense of vulnerability as a common condition and an ambivalent—not negative—term, a definition similar to Butler's. Gilson characterizes ambivalent vulnerability as “a more general term encompassing conceptions of passivity, affectivity, openness to change, dispossession, and exposure” (310). Moving beyond ambivalent vulnerability, Gilson then posits a positive, epistemic vulnerability. Epistemic vulnerability is constitutive, attending to “the way in which we become who we are through our openness to others” (319). This third vulnerability asks that an individual be open to not knowing, being wrong, and yet venturing; attends to affective and embodied knowing; and most significantly, engages a willingness to alter “not just one's ideas and beliefs, but one's self and sense of one's self” (325–26). Epistemic vulnerability demands an attitude of full engagement and willingness to change.

In this inquiry, I use Butler's definition of precarity as a political condition resulting from failed social and economic networks, creating differential exposure to injury, violence, and death. “Precarious” is used as a synonym with an ambivalent vulnerability, acknowledging the universal state of potential violation and liberation. In analyzing Buffalo's engagement with its refugee population, I also employ both negative vulnerability and epistemic vulnerability to understand the constraints and possibilities on representing and so engaging the Other. Through this vocabulary, I critique the media's rhetorical framework for charactering refugees in Buffalo, a model city for resettlement.

National and local media regularly represent Buffalo's refugees as entrepreneurial saviors of the decaying city. The refugee, no longer vulnerable, repairs the Rust Belt city. Such representations deny precarity and reveal the rhetorical technologies of citizen-making. Paradoxically, as the self-sufficiency of refugees is imagined, if not demanded, the precarity of Buffalo's long-term residents is exposed. Thus, the drive to portray self-sufficient refugees reveals the underlying failure of neoliberalism. The dynamics and implications of the rhetorical reversal of precarity are significant for understanding the success of Buffalo's resettlement programs.

By what rhetorical strategy does the media construct precarious refugees as neoliberal subject-citizens who can revitalize a city? What are the benefits and costs of constructing refugees as economic saviors? Ultimately I argue that although humanitarian frameworks often frame refugees through negative vulnerability and precarity for one set of political purposes, successful resettlement of refugees may depend on minimizing, if not denying, these characteristics. Furthermore, the paradox inherent in reversing precarity potentially provides Buffalo's inhabitants with shared geographies as it promotes epistemic vulnerability and the possibility of critique. In the end, "precarity" is a term particularly useful in rhetorical and political strategy, readily manipulated to reverse and redefine privilege.

BUFFALO AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Understanding rhetorical responses to the refugee crisis is particularly urgent. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports, in 2015, a record 65.3 million refugees; over 50 percent are children. The rate of people fleeing war and persecution rose from six per minute in 2005 to twenty-four per minute in 2015; about 34,000 people are displaced every day. In one day alone, June 23, 2016, 4,500 migrants were rescued from dozens of small boats in the Mediterranean Sea.¹ In this context, I examine the rhetorical strategies supporting what has been called a model program for resettling refugees. News outlets from NPR to Yahoo to the *Middle East Eye* join Ambassador Power in praising the city of Buffalo and Erie County's resettlement of refugees.² Buffalo's commitment to welcoming refugees is significant; one might study the city's recently formed Office of New Americans, its first chief of diversity, the Buffalo Police Language Access Program, the commitment to providing refugee children with 25 percent of the spots in the summer youth camp, the city's *New American Study: A Strategic Action Plan to Advance Immigrant and Refugee Integration and Success*, or the White House report, *Bright Spots in Welcoming*

and Integration: A Report by White House Task Force on New Americans, which recognized Buffalo as a Bright Spot, a preferred community for refugees.

Since 2003, significantly more than 14,000 refugees have resettled in the city of Buffalo, a city of just over 250,000 (Miller). Buffalo has been accepting over 1,300 refugees per year, but many who were initially settled elsewhere later moved to create critical cultural mass. The largest portions come from Burma (Myanmar), Somalia, Bhutan, Iraq, and the Republic of the Congo; three hundred invited Syrian refugees will add to the diversity.³ A decade ago, Buffalo media occasionally worried about the precarity of refugees and their economic cost to the precarious county. Now, however, it reports that refugees have stabilized the city's shrinking population; revitalized the city's West Side, where 90 percent initially settle; and provided an international economic network.⁴ 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 nineteen- to forty-four-year-old demographic. Tracking recent immigration and change on Buffalo's West Side, 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.

In my analysis, I focus primarily on the *Buffalo News*, daily circulation 139,000, studying more than thirty-five articles published from October 2009 to January 2017. During that period, the *Buffalo News* increased its coverage of resettlement and changed its reporting pattern from one of public education and economic worry to celebrations of refugee entrepreneurship, culture, and cuisine. The *Buffalo News* offers a synecdoche of the local media. Certainly it is not the only outlet emphasizing the economic value of refugees. For instance, the January 2016 *Buffalo Spree*, a glossy magazine usually promoting elegant housing and fine dining, invites readers to "Meet Buffalo's Newest Residents and Find Out How They Are Enriching Our Community." Tellingly, it emphasizes refugee contributions to employment, education, and urban revitalization over trauma and vulnerability, as the use of "enriching" suggests.

BUFFALO'S GEOGRAPHY AS RHETORICAL SPACE

Although representations of refugees may help to structure their acceptance, large parts of Buffalo's success with resettlement stem from material condi-

tions, such as inexpensive housing stock, a good public transportation system, and an established infrastructure of social services that settle and assist refugees. Four different resettlement agencies—Catholic Charities, International Institute, Jewish Family Services, and Journey’s End—offer support for the first three to six months, but then a myriad other community services, from the area’s seven colleges and universities to multiple health care centers, provide ongoing support for English language skills, job placement, housing, medical care, and so on. For example, three linked programs—Hope Refugee Services, HomeFront, and M&T Bank Corp—have designed a program to support refugee home buyers in saving, understanding the U.S. financial system, and obtaining credit (Epstein). As well, a supportive city and county government facilitates resettlement. In 2015, Mayor Byron W. Brown created an Office of New Americans, and County Executive Mark Poloncarz created a New Americans Advisory Committee.⁵ Poloncarz also supports the hiring of county workers fluent in immigrant languages, as refugees represent sixty languages, and he has personally welcomed refugees on many occasions.

Another consideration: Buffalo is a border town, easily characterized by its borders, both internal and international. With an increased fear of terrorism and increasing numbers of economic migrants and refugees, national concern for secure borders has grown, resulting in exclusionary asylum processes. Certainly borders are dividing lines, created and maintained by the nation-state, but the nature of division is not singular. For example, although Gloria Anzaldúa articulates the transformative power of borders, acknowledging their liminality and human resistance to either/or epistemologies, she primarily sees the U.S.-Mexican border as a painful, open wound, writing, “the U. S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman emphasize that the character of borders, boundaries, and crossings varies. Even as it has been affected by post-9/11 regulation, the U.S.-Canadian border is a permeable border. Buffalo is a small city, just over 250,000 residents, on the edge of Canada’s population center, 12.2 million residents of prosperous southern Ontario. Metropolitan Buffalo has three bridges with Canada, bridges inadequate to the flow of traffic. The two nation’s flags often fly together, the two anthems are played at sports events, and the local news announces exchange rates, crossing times, and Canadian holidays as it reports temperatures in Fahrenheit and centigrade. International economic and cultural exchanges occur every day and have for centuries, the flow of traffic following the currency rates.

Contrasting Buffalo's permeable international borders, as a nineteenth-century city, Buffalo has historically defined neighborhoods or borders within, and its internal (socioeconomic and cultural) borders may be more multifaceted in that their interpenetrations create and hail differences. Neighborhoods become a means of containment, identity formation, and relationship building, and thus the assemblage of refugees in the West Side facilitates their cultural preservations through community organizations, shops, newspapers, and places of worship even as it limits their contact with the more established populations. That 90 percent of refugees live in the West Side may help local acceptance in that refugees' negative vulnerability and precarity remain invisible throughout much of the city, conveniently hidden on the West Side.⁶ The cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences among Buffalo's neighborhoods interact complexly. More than simple geographic boundaries, borders qualify divisions and control migrations as they shape and regulate political, cultural, economic, and social relationships. If the acceptance of Canadian shoppers and business partnerships signifies a fully sanctioned relationship, I demonstrate that sanction also extends to the West Side's refugees through a transformative paradox based in reversing precarity.

Following Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, I consider borders to provide an epistemic viewpoint that gives critical residents on both sides the possibility of seeing "how relations of domination, dispossession, and exploitation are being redefined" and understanding "the struggles that take shape around these changing relationships" (18). Fostering epistemic vulnerability, borders invite or demand a willingness to alter one's beliefs, and as sites of struggle, borders can produce redefinition and changed relations. Knowledge of other ways of being is exchanged at borders, and hence, borders potentially offer opportunities to reinvent global politics. The struggles and stresses of the borders may accentuate all three aspects of vulnerability and precarious relationships, but they may also produce an "in-between," Hannah Arendt's term for the positional space that "relates and separates men at the same time" (52). The in-between delineates the scene of recognition, where people are positioned—related and separated—by a common lifeworld of objects, symbols, events, and actions. The shared space in-between begins relationships through the acknowledged presence of a shared world. Before recognition, "without an explicit demand or precluding of full recognition" (53), the in-between offers the potential to find shared acts and words, not the demand for them.⁷ As I discuss in *Deliberative Acts*, through being seen and heard from different positions, interlocutors may come to better decisions, but there is no demand for deliberation in the space of in-between. Hence, Buffalo's openness to resettlement and familiarity with borders facilitates both the creation

of in-betweens and the *possibility* of shared acts and words, the possibility of epistemic vulnerability.

PRECARIITY REWRITTEN AS ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

U.S. citizens are often celebrated as self-reliant, entrepreneurial, and civically engaged; alternatively, refugees are often characterized as precarious (Cacho; Mezzadra and Neilson; Ong; Powell). In reversing these common-places and denying the precarious lives of refugees, paradoxically the Buffalo media carves refugees a more secure place in the city by including them in an imagined community and representing them as enriching the wider region. Perversely, in reifying refugees' embrace of neoliberal values, the media acknowledges Buffalo's economic difficulties and the failure of neoliberalism in the Rust Belt. That is, the media, as part of the technology of citizen formation, frames the grounds of recognition in terms of the dominant political rhetoric. If international and urban borders contribute to the construction of an in-between, the press frames the potential acts in terms of the existing discourses and concerns.

Significant, early coverage of refugees occurred in the business section of *Buffalo News*, more geared toward educating readers about resettlement than to including refugees in the neoliberal polity. In October 2007, two linked essays presented refugees as negatively vulnerable; still, the titles reveal a concern with the transition from precarity to potential, from past to future: "Refugees from the World's Most Troubled Nations Find New Homes in Buffalo," and "Fleeing Wars and Persecution, Refugees Pursue Their Dreams Here." The differences between the two essays and how they imagine refugees might be seen through the verbs in the titles. Ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle analyzes the difference between terminus verbs and process verbs. Terminus verbs, like "find," designate an endpoint of action; the refugees have ended their troubles in finding a home. Process verbs, like "seek" and "pursue," describe ongoing action and open possibility; the second essay's title reveals a commitment to ongoing action by the refugees in that they will continue to pursue dreams until they are reality. This difference is evident in the body of the articles, too.

In the first essay, "Find New Homes," journalist Jay Rey provides an educational overview of the history and resettlement of refugees. He discusses challenges in the schools, laments the difficult job market, and analyzes strained social services, observing that the federal government only covers initial costs. His analysis is in the present tense, giving a subtle sense that identity is fixed.

For example, the last few lines introduce a woman from Burundi and her surprise that her neighbors are “mostly white people,” an ending that clearly emphasizes difference and confirms her precarity in the lack of home and community. The second essay, “Pursue Their Dreams,” balances community education with refugee dreams and obstacles. Journalist Jay Tokasz discusses western New York’s tradition of German, Irish, Italian, and Polish immigration. In doing so, he gestures to the cultural heritage of his readership and its knowledge of difficult migrations. Emphasizing transitions, he intertwines the voices of two African refugees (Somalia and Sudan) with that of a Somali immigrant who has graduated from the University at Buffalo as a way of predicting their productive futures. Although he notes that some local residents are concerned “about immigrants not fitting in and being a drain on city and county resources,” the essay discusses the interviewees’ jobs and ambitions; tellingly, it quotes Mohamed A. Mohamed, a University at Buffalo graduate: “If you bring those people, they become taxpayers.” Here the move from refugee to taxpayer-citizen is a given end.

These early articles recognize loss and negative vulnerability, but one can see two trends emerging. First, the second essay marks the rapid conflation of refugee and negative vulnerability to immigrant and employment. In leaving behind issues of trauma and persecution, the press emphasizes becoming an employed, taxpaying American, an identity given as a basic, healing good. Second, the economic value of refugees to the city displaces their economic need and precarity. The economic value emerges as a potential counterweight to the cost of their negative vulnerability. Media themes of neoliberalism develop as Buffalo grows as a resettlement city and the abilities of refugees become more visible. Concerns about costs to the city and worry about early trauma all but disappear. Only one exception can be found; a 2015 article addresses cost concerns in response to the cutting of services. Mark Sommer’s first sentence emphasizes the negative vulnerability of the refugees: “Dr. Myron and Joyce Glick nearly two decades ago opened a health clinic on Buffalo’s West Side to help refugees fleeing war-torn countries and poverty-stricken conditions.” Note the sentence includes both local history and commitment as it emphasizes the trauma and material need of refugees. The theme of trauma does not disappear as the article proceeds to discuss the services of the Jericho Road Community Health Center, its small price tag, and possible political reasons for its funding cuts. Still the concern with precarity is couched in terms of economic expediency. County Executive Poloncarz is quoted as arguing not only for humanitarian concerns but for economic pragmatics: “These organizations help people become self-sufficient. . . . If we can spend a tiny amount

of money like this we can save millions in the long run on public assistance costs.”

Aside from the 2015 report on funding cuts, the *Buffalo News* has increasingly focused on the economic development of individual refugees and cultural tourism. This trend emphasizes what the refugees give the city, creating a citywide awareness of an in-between, a relationship where the city is the shared world. Significantly, in ignoring negative vulnerabilities and emphasizing the common lifeworld of the in-between, the paper gestures toward an epistemic vulnerability where there is an economic and culture openness to others, though not fully an attitude of engagement and desire to change oneself, but an openness to a changed city and citizenship. In this vein, even international news becomes tied to Buffalo’s economy and citizenship, the world imagined through the shared space of the city, as in a report on local response to Burma’s move to democracy (Zremski, “Former”). Through interviews with eighteen former political prisoners celebrating at a local Buddhist monastery, Zremski demonstrates the shared value of democracy. Despite the obvious political and international frame and the potential for representing negative vulnerability, the economic significance of refugees remains; the article notes that 8,000 Burmese refugees have “helped to revive swaths of the West Side and Black Rock/Riverside.” Although acknowledging Burma’s ethnic wars, which caused 140,000 Burmese to become refugees, the article connects that negative vulnerability to the revitalization of Buffalo, moving quickly from the refugees’ precarity to their contributions to the city.

Although the contribution of cultural tourism is sometimes the focus—for example, “West Side Mural Honors Buffalo’s Burmese Community” (Dabkowski)—the mutual economic benefits of home ownership (Epstein) and entrepreneurship are more common topics. Invariably, coverage of the West Side Bazaar combines both economic and cultural messages, and thus it has become a mechanism for presuming joyful resettlement, one in which refugees leave behind the political complexity of precarity and the trauma of negative vulnerability to become neoliberal citizens, contributing to the U.S. economy and global trade. Perhaps for this very reason, since the West Side Bazaar opened in 2011 (<http://www.westsidebazaar.com/>), it has received attention from local newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, and from national outlets such as *USA Today*, NPR, and *Yahoo News*. Housed in an old grocery, the collection of micro-loan start-ups—stalls, tabletops, and a food court—is sometimes imagined as the center of revitalized Buffalo, a cultural contact zone, and the entrepreneurial spirit of refugees and immigrants.⁸ Initially a grant-driven project of Westminster Economic Development Ini-

tiative, the bazaar identifies both cultural and economic missions for itself.⁹ Its website describes it as “a local, regional, and national attraction” and “an International Market and food destination.” More tellingly, it self-describes as “a small business incubator where new business owners could find a safe, nurturing, and inexpensive environment to develop their business with guidance in the ways of running an enterprise successfully.” Initially it housed six new business owners from Rwanda, South Sudan, Peru, Indonesia, and the United States; in five years, it has grown to sixteen businesses. It has hosted fifty businesses in a city of 10,000 refugees, suggesting that its fame exceeds its impact. Although I would not diminish the accomplishments of the West Side Bazaar—it has launched successful shops and restaurants—the attention to the small incubator is symptomatic of the fantastic transformation of the refugee into a neoliberal subject, capable of receiving a micro-grant and establishing a competitive business.

Although this transformation can happen, for thousands of refugees the economic, psychological, and social changes are more fraught. The narratives produced by the media are selected carefully and are simple, focusing on the individual entrepreneurial refugee as an ideal. For example, Zelalem Gemmeda first appeared in the *Buffalo News* in February 2015, when she won the Entrepreneur of the Year Award from Rich Products, a local company, the award consisting of a certificate and \$500 (Sapong, “Ethiopian”). Among her recognized accomplishments is advocating for the seven day a week opening of West Side Bazaar. Nine months later, an extended interview emphasizes the fulfillment of her American dreams (Radlich). As her children receive scholarships leading to college, Gemmeda continues working in the food court of the West Side Bazaar, preparing food with Ethiopian spices sent by her sister. This representation of an entrepreneurial refugee frames her identity between an international transfer of spices and her son’s graduation from Colgate University, offering her as evidence of opportunity in Buffalo, successful globalization, and the easy integration of refugees into the U.S. economy.

DISCARDING PRECARITY?

As long-term residents eat and shop at the West Side Bazaar, how do they imagine the shopkeepers? Do they accept the media’s neoliberal representations or wonder why this particular in-between is more referenced than, say, the schools? Why do members of the dominant culture seek this particular space? Is the consumption a synecdoche for the global capitalism and an easy way to deny its failure in Buffalo and the economic vulnerability of citizens,

both resettled and native-born? In her desire to understand precarious lives, Butler would have us “interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense” (*Precarious* 151). Unlike more intimate places such as mosques and temples, the West Side Bazaar has come to represent a public sphere constituted in what can be comfortably known, shown, and said by long-term residents. For many, it is the limit of initial engagement, the limit of who can be recognized. At this moment, in Buffalo, the neoliberal values espoused by the media seemingly deny the politics of precarity as they facilitate one kind of interaction in between new and established residents. The consequences of this recognition are not benign, as they demand a normalization of consumer capitalism and a denial of trauma, identity, and economic insecurity. That is, when the refugees are repurposed as arriving to save the great U.S. city, their negative vulnerability is unrecognized, as is their agency in self-naming. What might be epistemic vulnerability *seemingly* is rescripted as openness to commercial success.

In what follows, however, I assume that commercial spaces, due to their transactional nature, predominately function as in-betweens, but they also do the significant work of eroding borders between locals and refugees and between nationalities among refugees. That is, commercial spaces—real and imagined—can create an in-between, a shared world of things, both material and cognitive. In *Deliberative Acts*, I appropriate Hannah Arendt’s concept of the in-between as the scene of recognition and potentially deliberative and transformative space (54–59, 92–97). The in-between both relates and separates people in the present tense; it is less a social meeting, a table between us, than a temporal tension between the past and future. Being seen and heard by others potentially shifts participants and pushes them to new positions, or at least, toward acknowledging their own position. As I wrote, “the deliberative present creates a temporal gap and spatial positioned potential where the citizen agent is vulnerable to her own acts as well as the acts of other interlocutors in-between” (55). In the in-between, people position themselves in ways that might lead to epistemic vulnerability, to not knowing and being wrong and yet venturing. The West Side Bazaar, as a jumble of cultures, sometimes can be viewed as exotic, but it also positions visitors in ways that can challenge beliefs about the nature of Buffalo, refugees, and local economics. Epistemic vulnerability creates possibility. That is, even at the limits of what we humans can know, hear, see, and sense, there is a potential shifting of understanding in our positions.

The dynamic potential of the in-between, particularly at the borders, relates to Butler’s more pessimistic observation that “not only is there always

the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the 'unrecognizable,' but when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself" (*Precarious* 43). That is, vulnerability—given its three semantic fields—is not stable, especially as dispersed across relationships. At first glance, within the technology of the West Side Bazaar, both vulnerability and precarity's political potential are transformed to opportunities for service and economic development, both for a city and for an individual refugee. The meaning and structure of a refugee's negative vulnerability is shifted to entrepreneurial strength. One might hope the West Side Bazaar might provoke ambiguous or epistemic vulnerability—perhaps its practices do—but its primary representation is as a site of consumer capitalism. Obviously a rhetoric that diminishes precarity and promotes neoliberal values can be easily criticized as co-optive or exploitative. In denying precarity, history, and all other ways of being human, neoliberal discourses achieve a self-sustaining momentum and monological power, hiding deeper paradoxes, a theme to which I will return. Currently being successfully resettled refugees denies the trauma, the history, and the birth culture as it subsumes them under the dominant discourse, privileging their economic self over any broader intersection of being and any community of origin. In denying who refugees were and are, the rhetoric of neoliberalism creates new (false) identities in the service of dominant values and communities, values and communities distant, even alien, from the lives of refugees, and yet it is hard to critique the pure effectiveness of Buffalo's successful model of resettlement. Something works here.

Ignoring the struggles of refugees is disturbing, but their inclusion in the wider Buffalo community is a significant accomplishment. I maintain inclusion is a necessary accomplishment for successful resettlement whether achieved through glorifying the high school soccer successes of Somalian refugees in Lewiston, Maine, or shopping the bakeries of Little Bosnia in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁰ Not all cities have succeeded in welcoming and including refugees, and if a neoliberal rhetoric of inclusion limits the terms of recognition, it also offers a collective identity, one that lays a groundwork for "inter-ests," not selfish interests, but Arendt's term for granting what relates and binds us to others (182). The neoliberal articulation of resettlement pragmatically succeeds in that refugees are placed in relationship to a people and a community, and while other positives of such rhetorical strategy may be harder to grant, I want to understand the positive possibilities of this strategy, through considering the constitutive power of "we the people," a power that necessarily excludes some, but in the Buffalo case, includes refugees, makes them visible, and recognizes them. Furthermore, in making them economic saviors of the city,

the discourse reconstitutes the identity of the precarious refugee, inverting the inherent hierarchy of negative vulnerability and reimagining refugees as migrants central to the city's health. As Butler observes, "the discursive move to establish 'the people' in one way or another is a bid to have a certain border recognized, whether we understand that as a border of a nation or as the frontier of that class of people to be considered 'recognizable' as a people" (*Notes* 5). Concerned with how "the people" become performative and politically self-determining, Butler understands "we the people" as linguistic autogenesis, beginning a process of identifying "needs, demands and desires" (169). Hence, when the media revise refugee identity, they recognize them within the borders of city and citizen. The process of political formation begins.

Chantal Mouffe's work on agonistic democracy, democratic citizenship, and political community is explicit on the discursive nature of shared community. Both of us discern dangers in the prevalence of neoliberal ideology and its ubiquity; still, she tellingly observes, "neo-liberal dogmas about the unviolable [*sic*] rights of property, the all-encompassing virtues of the market and the dangers of interfering with its logics constitute nowadays the 'common sense' in liberal-democratic societies" (6). The ubiquity of market logic makes it all but impossible to elude; hence, its strategy must be confronted and addressed. In the face of such pervasive "common sense" and its self-sustaining momentum, what is achieved in rewriting refugees as neoliberal subjects? Could they be recognized without that common sense? By including refugees in mainstream values, Buffalo's media—wittingly or unwittingly—includes them in the community, or at least the social collective, and authorizes their participation in city institutions. In opposition to valorizing all differences, a move that would evade politics, Mouffe would have us acknowledge that collective identities are part of the agonism of politics. I tentatively offer that, despite its inequity, at this moment in U.S. politics, scripting the collective identity of neoliberal subjects may be necessary to including refugees and creating an identity where they have the potential of politics. There are two interlocking concepts here: (1) relations of power and (2) the imperative of at least some shared political and ideological space.

First, as well recognized, power is not external to identity or relationships, but rather constitutes identities and relationships. In the media's construction of a relationship between established citizenry and newly arrived refugees, the relationship itself becomes a means of interaction. It is a relationship sanctified by capital, the state, and media representations, but contaminated with hegemony and misrecognition. The relationship is flawed in that the recognition is distorted through a required American dream, entrepreneurship, and a falsely inverted hierarchy where refugees save America. Even so, the

relationship should not be discarded abruptly because it serves to authorize the foundational moves toward a shared politics. As Mouffe writes, “politics aims at the creation of unity in the context of conflict and diversity: it is concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’” (101). Hear echoes of Butler’s “we the people.” The Buffalo media does not designate a “them,” but one might assume that the inherent “them” are neither Buffalo long-term residents nor recent arrivals committed to a more economically stable city. In accepting the creation of an “us,” a power-based relationship, Mouffe dismisses a model of endless antagonism and diversity as diminishing the possibility of politics. Instead, she understands struggle within democratic politics through a shift from seeing opponents as enemies and rather conceiving them as adversaries with whom one shares common ground on the democratic principles of equality and liberty. Of course, equality and liberty are liberal values, not neoliberal values. At this moment, however, neoliberalism is such a dominant regime that it may be the Other’s first step toward finding inclusion and adversaries rather than antagonism, enemies, or pity. Through the false imaginary of neoliberalism, rather than dwelling in negative or ambiguous vulnerability, refugees are imagined as open to the city’s established values, imagined as embracing a constitutive, epistemic vulnerability that creates possibilities, such as new identities, for refugees themselves. In turn, by being open to the knowledge of refugees, long-term residents also are positioned in a space of epistemic vulnerability and potential identity change. The relations of power change.

Second, the imperative of at least some shared political and ideological space is an important, but fraught political concept.¹¹ As both a refusal of the drive to consensus and a modulation of antagonism, pluralism with agonism may be safer and more productive for precarious populations than direct identification with cultural rupture, language loss, and (post)colonial dependency. Yes, the cost of reframing identity from precarity to entrepreneurship denies refugee trauma and posits too facile a cultural engagement and identity change, one in service to an unexamined status quo. Still, Butler observes, precarity has the potential to create a different type of political coalition, one that would *not* require “agreement on all questions of desire or belief or self-identification” (*Frames* 32). Balancing the potential of a rich agonistic pluralism with the dangers of exclusion is a troubled undertaking. In the face of the refugee crisis, the discourse of neoliberalism—in its ubiquity—provides a rhetorical tool for creating inter-ests. When people in Buffalo announce that their city is a model for refugee resettlement, they acknowledge both inclusion and pluralism, neither a simple accomplishment.

PARADOXES ABOUND

Disregarding refugee precarity and cultural difference paradoxically creates an in-between where refugees become an acknowledged part of the city. In pragmatically accepting the construction of economic and political engagement, however, one should be hypervigilant about how “the imaginary is guided and channeled within the communication machine” (Hardt and Negri 33). The rhetoric of capitalism extends into the life itself and serves to blind us to possible resistance. Seemingly the imaginary of this self-sustaining communication machine, a monologic power, hides the failures of its logic. For example, one might consider how Buffalo’s citizens accept a substantive equality with refugees—one founded in shared inter-ests—without attending to other significant problems of equality and economics. Neoliberalism might be imagined as a form of life that founds a particular political community, but its strident, rhetorical presence cannot completely bury its structural failure. In focusing on entrepreneurial successes, the media ignores facts, such as Buffalo’s poverty rate. Buffalo is the third poorest city in the United States, just behind Rust Belt sisters Detroit and Cleveland: 41 percent of blacks and 45 percent of Asians and Hispanics live in poverty (Rey, “More Than”). Further, 82 percent of its students are labeled “economically disadvantaged,” and close to 54 percent of its children live in poverty.¹² In focusing on the successes of a few refugees, the dominant discourse fails to name the precarity of all of Buffalo’s poor, both native-born and refugee, but that poverty does not evaporate.

A further failure of logic: perhaps the media seeks to create relationships between equals, but in fact, the refugee is imagined as more powerful and more able to navigate the failed Rust Belt economy than the long-term residents. In simply resettling vacant parts of Buffalo, replacing the missing youth demographic, and developing small shops, the refugees replace populations who fled for better economic environments. In doing so, they are constructed as saviors of a city and creators of a new economy. This narrative of fluid migration ignores both earlier histories and the forces that control lives, pushing people across borders. When jobs were lost in the collapse of manufacturing, the demographics and economy of Buffalo changed, and poverty grew, revealing the failure of unregulated capitalism. Refugees are sent to Buffalo because of its inexpensive housing and need for population, but they must create their own jobs because of its high unemployment rates and poorly paying jobs.

Implicit in the representation of refugees is the claim that the Buffalo economy needs to be saved, and saved by geopolitical actions outside its bor-

ders. In characterizing war and forced migration as a source of U.S. development, even as it creates community, the media implicitly omits the failures of neoliberalism and U.S. policies as it rearticulates failures as opportunities, just not opportunities for long-term residents. The momentum and monological power of neoliberal rhetorics hides deeper paradoxes as to the honest possibilities of individual entrepreneurship. If long-term residents cannot revitalize Buffalo, by what logic can vulnerable refugees be expected to do so? Rather than see the paradox as a problem to be resolved, I would join others, such as Mouffe and Bonnie Honig, in suggesting that paradoxes are productive in disrupting monologs and monologics, revealing cultural conflicts, creating deliberative or political moments, and calling forth citizen response.¹³ Paradoxes can disrupt single answers and push interlocutors to define inter-ests and commit to struggles over meaning. The rhetorical strategy of transforming precarity and vulnerability to equality, even salvation, offers a lens into the technology of citizen creation and neoliberal monologism, but more significantly its paradox reveals the fissure in the monolog and so might stop its totalizing momentum.¹⁴ The paradoxical construction of refugees saving precarious U.S. cities, once revealed and analyzed, disrupts the stability of neoliberal valuations and opens new possibilities for critical responses.

RESPONDING TO NEOLIBERAL MONOLOGUES

As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter argue, the experience of precarity creates the conditions from which “differential capacities and regimes of value emerge” (64). Similarly, Gilson writes, “*vulnerability* is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us” (310). Vulnerability can be “a condition of potential” (311). Just as paradoxes are productive, so too can be precarity. Of further interest, across different experiences of precarity, in the current global economy, precarity is becoming a norm and not an exception (Neilson and Rossiter 68). Both the new and long-term residents of Buffalo struggle. As the denial of precarity can mark a productive social leveling and allow for a social collective, its denial can obliterate the enabling potential of precarity to change values. Currently the precarity and precariousness of both populations is framed in such a way that neither can escape the demands of self-sufficiency. Even so, the articulation of the paradox of refugee vulnerability and self-sufficiency allows for critique. That critique potentially redefines the terms of welcoming resettlement. If it is not possible to escape the neoliberal frame and the legal requirement of refugee economic self-sufficiency, the critique can nudge the in-between and the nature of inter-ests toward engagements that foster epistemic vulnerability and offer potential for politi-

cal change. Shared space (in-between) and inter-est initially represented in the neoliberal subject extends to both refugees and Buffalo's long-term residents the right to appear and be recognized. It offers a potential position for critique, a moment revealed by paradox.

Lisa Duggan calls for a critical response to neoliberalism, one dependent on integrating cultural and identity issues with the political economy; she hopes for a new social movement leading to a new global politics. As she rightly claims, the discourse of neoliberalism permeates cultural and identity politics: "Neoliberalism was constructed in and through cultural and identity politics and cannot be undone by a movement without constituencies and analyses that respond directly to that fact. Nor will it be possible to build a new social movement . . . as long as cultural and identity issues are separated, analytically and organizationally, from the political economy in which they are embedded" (3). At the end of *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri make a similar call, although they are more optimistic in their demand for action, "absolute democracy in action." They too defer defining future political events, proposing that "the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer models and determine when and how the possible becomes real" (410, 411).

I have heard their calls, but I do not have a model, a new social movement. Whose imaginary will become the future remains unclear. I simply analyze local cultural and identity issues and offer a few global observations. First, if refugees become "we the people" through neoliberal imaginings, the productivity and efficiency of that rhetorical strategy are worthy of attention, but glib inclusion—even if it facilitates politics—is not in the service of a new politics. It diverts attention from failed economic histories and the struggles of precarity. Second, refugees, who are defined by precarity, may not be the ideal agents for building the social movement or providing the analyses that link cultural and identity issues with the political economy. Their inclusion in the city and the country is fragile and new, most Buffalo refugees arriving in the last five years. The demands of vulnerability, in all three manifestations, may require their attention. The analyses and critiques—as well as the political response to neoliberal failures—are more likely to arise from their children, activists, the media, academics, and other long-term residents. Third, as offered here, acknowledgment of mutual vulnerability—both of refugees and the long-term residents—achieves an acknowledgment of a shared form of life as well as the acknowledgment of the mutual cost of global capital. In apprehending and acknowledging common, if not universal, human vulnerability to failed economies and states, Buffalo is potentially positioned to create a community better able to address political, economic, and social violence. The interdependency of neighbors across borders may create a social collective capable of shared agency and political effect. As Butler observed, "From where might a principle emerge

by which we vow to protect others from the kind of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?" (*Precarious* 30).

NOTES

1. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36611059>
2. In addition to local voices celebrating Buffalo's success, national news acknowledges Buffalo's reception of refugees. See Joel Rose's piece on NPR's *Morning Edition*, Katie Couric's *Yahoo News* video, Laura Kirkpatrick in *PassBlue*, a CUNY Graduate Center publication that covers the UN, and James Reinl in *Middle East Eye* on Buffalo's welcoming of Muslims.
3. See "Editorial: Erie County Merits Praise for Offer to Resettle Suffering Syrians."
4. As early as 2003, in an effort to revitalize the West Side, the city developed a project with pushcart vendors, reportedly Latino immigrants. See Biddlecom.
5. See Miller.
6. Conscious of the damaging effects of borders, Buffalo's International Institute plays with the idea of borders in the title of its annual food-center fundraiser. "Buffalo without Borders" suggests that the problem of borders and the difficulty of their irradication is worth a night of consideration.
7. "Nepantla," sometimes translated as "in-between," is a Nahuatl term arising in colonization. As used by Anzaldúa, its connotations include distress, dislocation, and oppression. With different cultural origins and connotations, it highlights Arendt's ambivalent sense of a shared space that both relates and separates.
8. See Couric; Rose; Preval.
9. In 2007, WEDI was begun by members of the Westminster Presbyterian Church. In 2009, concerned West Side agencies, business owners, and residents met and planned to encourage business on the West Side, becoming the West Side Stake Holders. The two joined with the mission of nurturing micro-businesses (Sapong, "Helping"). WEDI now has eleven full-time employees, a zero percent default rate on micro-loans, and a high success rate on grants (interview May 2016).
10. See Bass; Rivero.
11. See Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* and Michael L. Ferguson's *Sharing Democracy* for overviews of community, commonality, and their alternatives. Ferguson outlines the difficulties with a democratic requirement of commonality as opposed to loose concepts, such as collective enactments. My *Deliberative Acts* similarly critiques consensus and argues for a performative model of deliberation.
12. <http://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2013&instid=800000052968>; <http://www.dailypublic.com/articles/01202015/staggering-poverty-facing-buffalo-students>
13. I discuss the productivity of the political paradox in *Deliberative Acts* (152–68, 175–77).
14. Like Rousseau's paradox of origins (democracy needs good men to make good laws, but needs good laws to make good men), one can see the paradox of the neoliberal citizen (one needs entrepreneurs to make good economies, but one needs good economies to make entrepreneurs).

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