

# Precarious Placemaking

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## Abstract

This review brings anthropological accounts of place and placemaking into dialogue with the concepts of precarity and precariousness. In recent years, precarity has become a widespread empirical and theoretical concern across the humanities. The article traces the simultaneous rise alongside precarity of network and ontology as post-place-based frameworks for anthropological analysis. Although these new frames facilitate anthropological explorations in the spirit of the times, this review argues that both network and ontology lack the capacity to identify what is being transformed and what is at stake when and where precarity takes hold. To see models of placemaking as spaces of transformative possibility requires an account of coexisting, qualitatively distinctive forms of relationship to places.



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## ON BEING OUT OF PLACE: CENTRAL AUSTRALIA, OCTOBER 2010

Protracted interfamily feuding erupts at the largest Aboriginal town in the region following the death of a young Warlpiri man during an alcohol-fueled fight. Weeks later, more than 100 relatives of the men charged with offenses that led to his death, which amounts to 10% of the local population, are banished by the family of the deceased and flee their hometown. These people are recognized under Australian law as the traditional owners of more than 100,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Tanami Desert, but they seek refuge in the opposite direction, traveling 2,000 km by bus to the South Australian capital city of Adelaide. Their departure follows a federal-government-declared national emergency regarding the safety and well-being of children, as well as state threats to withdraw funding from small, remote Aboriginal towns and to force welfare recipients to relocate to regional centers to pursue mainstream forms of work (Strakosh 2015). Places long regarded as bastions of traditional Aboriginal culture are dramatically transformed in the public's perception, becoming newly imaged as sites of dangerous, dysfunctional, and illegal activity (Hinkson 2010). The new government laws legitimized by such images make it illegal for Aboriginal people to practice their own customary forms of dispute resolution. Also brought into law are new paternalistic measures to oversee the spending of welfare payments and to enforce school attendance (Altman 2014). In this turbulent space of unstable authority, the feud in the Warlpiri community drags on for four years. Throughout this period, people leave their hometown for extended periods, sick of the troubles, frightened by chaotic sorcery activity, bored with the limited options for meaningful activity in the town (Musharbash 2010). Others stay home but fantasize about leaving via intimate relationships with distant others on Facebook (Hinkson 2014, p. 150). Yet others stay but send their children and grandchildren away to boarding school in southern metropolitan centers. Through all of this upheaval one thing seems certain: Warlpiri ways of relating to places, as with other Aboriginal communities across Central Australia, are under severe pressure and in a process of transformation (Eickelkamp 2015, Holcombe 2015, Musharbash 2014, Ottosson 2015). Warlpiri observers, however, do not necessarily understand their situation thus. One senior man rebuffs my attempt to analyze the present in exceptional terms with a wave of his hand: "We have always moved around."

## PRECARITY AND PLACE

The ethnographic vignette with which this article opens is exemplary of and helps establish a wider contemporary situation. In recent years, displacement, mobility, and placemaking have asserted themselves in human experience, consciousness, and imagination with newly compelling force. From the 65 million people estimated in 2015 to have been forcibly displaced (UNHCR 2016) to rust-belt neighborhoods struggling with the withdrawal of industrial production; from agriculturalists dealing with unpredictable weather patterns and global markets to small island communities confronting rising sea levels; from intergenerational contests between indigenous people, states, and corporations over resource extraction to the hypermobility of labor migrants and cosmopolitan elites; from the Brexit vote to the ascendancy more generally of governments promising to close borders and push back against globalization—across these diverse situations the outcomes of unequal, contradictory pressures on erstwhile ways of living in places are everywhere apparent. This review brings anthropological accounts of place and placemaking into dialogue with concepts of precarity and precariousness. These concepts have been widely taken up in anthropology and across the humanities in recent years. Indeed, a review of the literature might suggest that precarity has been thoroughly interrogated with respect to the full variety of phenomena that attract anthropological attention. In the discussion that follows, however, I argue that key issues remain

to be considered. In coupling the terms “precarity” and “placemaking,” I hope to hold in sight a conjunction of circumstances and their analysis that is deserving of sustained consideration.

This review tracks the rise in interest in precarity via anthropologists’ shifting conceptions of place: from classical accounts that assume place as the relatively bounded ground of culture and social life to place as produced in unequal, colonial relations; from practice-based accounts of placemaking to phenomenological immersions in places and their atmospheres; from posthumanist conceptions of spatial distribution and the network to the bounded worlds of perspectival ontology. This article identifies a paradoxical conjunction between the recent rise of “network” (Latour 2005) and “ontology” (Viveiros de Castro 1998) as preferred anthropological models and the theoretical turn to precarity as a generalized condition of human interaction (Berlant 2011, Butler 2004, Standing 2011, Stewart 2012). Precarity has been seen to distill the characteristics of phenomena so diffuse, so vast, and multiscalar that it is impossible to grasp (Butler 2004, p. 13). In their respective flattening of fields of relations, the frameworks of network and ontology immerse us in precarity’s instabilities and structure of feeling but offer no vantage point from which to critically grapple with precarity’s distinctive features. To see models of placemaking as spaces of transformative possibility requires us to account for coexisting, qualitatively distinctive ways of relating to places and, as Navaro-Yashin (2009, p. 7) puts it, to find ways of remaining “in the midst of the piles of debris of knowledge production.”

Wary of the risk of embracing new concepts without paying sufficient attention to what they veil as much as what they bring to view (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003, Navaro-Yashin 2009, Stewart 2012), and at a time when precarity is seemingly ubiquitous in anthropological endeavors, I ask, what are its limits? Put another way, if this turn to precarity marks a multilayered tipping point—as taken-for-granted world orders and the conceptual schemas with which anthropologists have engaged those worlds teeter (again)—how can we best get at the conjunctions and paradoxical possibilities that such tipping points might enable us to hold in view? In pursuit of a compelling vantage point on these matters, I look to Mary Douglas’s work, which models the interplay between restricted and elaborated codes. The final section of this review explores two analytic constellations through which anthropologists make visible, and wrestle with, unresolved cross-paradigmatic conjunctures of history *and* becomings; representational *and* postrepresentational orders; structures *and* their dissolution; scalable *and* nonscalable entities; subjective relationships to places that are deeply sedimented *and* those more recently and consciously acquired—the kinds of transformative analysis that anthropologists are uniquely placed to generate and which are urgently required of us.

## ENCOUNTERS OF PRECARIOUS KINDS

Although “precarious” and “precarity” are often used interchangeably, there is nevertheless an important distinction between these terms that differentiates a generalized common condition of human sociality from the specificity of contemporary circumstances. Butler (2004), reading Arendt, draws attention to the etymological root of the term *precor* and shows precariousness to be a vital element of every exchange—the condition of being dependent on the grace or will of another. Butler’s formulation of a universal precarious ontology foregrounds the particular resonance of the concept for anthropologists; significantly, it implies the precarious nature of the anthropological encounter itself, as much as the relations into which anthropologists inquire. Precariousness presupposes a meeting place of relationships (Carter 2014) with transformative potentialities.

Precarity, on the other hand, has been deployed to describe the distinctive circumstances of the present: the material consequences of post-Fordism—together with its “historical sensorium,” characterized by a set of “dissolving assurances” (Berlant 2011, p. 3) and anxieties and insecurities

(Millar 2014, Wacquant 2014, Weston 2012)—“a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails” (Muehlebach 2013, p. 298). Allison (2013) points out that precarity refers to “the loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place” (p. 7), alluding to the longer, unequal processes of colonial capitalism that undergird contemporary instabilities. The transformative potentiality of precarity exists in the form of a new and “dangerous” class (Standing 2011), new and uncertain conditions, the demise of the manufacturing industry, and the collapse of neighborhoods organized around those industries (Walley 2013). Furthermore, as Allison (2013) observes, “Though it may start in one place, precarity soon slips into other dimensions of life”; it registers as “a sense of being out of place, out of sorts, disconnected” (p. 14). This distinction between a basic precariousness in human relations and historically specific precarity resonates with the differently ordered modes of mobility collapsed in my Warlpiri interlocutor’s dismissal, “We have always moved around.”

The larger circumstances being thought through in the theoretical turn to precarity call out new conceptualizations and methods as well as new interdisciplinary modes of writing (Stewart 2012). During (2015; see also Chakrabarty 2009) observes that precarity globalizes, and thus displaces, the category of the subaltern—an argument echoed in recent work by scholars of settler colonialism (Hage 2016) and in the shift of “refugee” from noun to verb to describe a pervasive experience of disenfranchisement and placelessness (Allison 2012, Fassin 2011). The rise of historical precarity marks the loss of earlier specific instances and kinds of inequality. The unemployed and working poor are increasingly recognized as sharing basic affinities with indigenous people. “You are all Aboriginal now,” announced an Australian Aboriginal academic at a meeting I attended to discuss the perilous conditions facing humanities scholars in the contemporary university. Ettlinger (2007), Stoler (2013), and Povinelli (2011) qualify precarity’s presentism, tracking its features as caught up in longer, more diffuse processes, reminding us of the need to look beyond the spectacular, the contemporary “crisis,” to comprehend seemingly exceptional, dramatic events as part of an unfolding “ordinary crisis” (Berlant 2011, p. 7).

Although paradigm-breaking consequences are often claimed for the theoretical turn to precarity, the history of anthropological analysis offers up some precursors for thinking through the analytic requirements for examining large-scale transformations in the ordering of life. One such precursor is Ortner’s (1998) call for an expanded anthropology that would recognize public culture as a primary arena of experience, practice, and meaning, effectively identifying a third strand of critical anthropological work, with its own distinctive set of interdisciplinary methods, alongside ethnography and social theory. In response, posthumanists might say that recognition of the Anthropocene is of a profoundly different order to the situation with which Ortner grapples—but the question remains: Is the inquiry into new circumstances best advanced by a complete break with existing modes of anthropological praxis? I find compelling Navaro-Yashin’s (2009) argument that ethnography is most productive in its trans-paradigmatic moments, as well as Bessire & Bond’s (2014) warning that failure to pay attention to the practices, processes, and structures that persist in contemporary situations ensures that a transformative politics will remain beyond reach.

## ANTHROPOLOGIES OF MAKING AND UNMAKING PLACES

If every human-to-human encounter could be characterized as inherently precarious, then anthropology is, by its very nature, a precarious enterprise. Similarly, across anthropology’s history, placemaking has everywhere featured as a foundational element of the crafting of ethnographic accounts and anthropological theory. Since Malinowski’s appeal to his reader to “[i]magine yourself suddenly set down . . . alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or

dinghy which brought you sails away out of sight” [Malinowski 1961 (1922), p. 4; Clifford 1986], depicting place has been integral to anthropological knowledge production. The anthropological work of the early to mid-twentieth century largely inscribed place as the uncontested ground of distinctive culture. This notion was the basis of Gupta & Ferguson’s political-economic critique more than six decades after Malinowski was writing; they revealed anthropologists’ models of distinct and isolated cultures as failing to engage the larger forces that “connected even the most isolated of local settings with a wider world” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, p. 2). In the wake of post–World War II decolonization, territorialization came to be understood as an outcome of “complex and contingent results of ongoing historical and political processes” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, p. 4). The places where anthropologists went to work were produced in the spatialized practices of colonial governance (Asad 1973, Harker 2012, Li 2007, Scott 1998). Anthropologists hence made such contested ground a primary focus, tracking the unmaking and remaking of places through displacement, dispossession, and intergenerational contests over land ownership and resource extraction, exploring indigenous modes of sense-making in circumstances of upheaval (Escobar 2003, Li 2014, Merlan 1998, Taussig 1980).

The end of the Cold War and the major shifts in geopolitical organization that followed saw heightened scholarly attention to globalization and its implications for cultural difference. Anthropologists tracked the circulation of people, ideas, and objects in processes of migration, mobility, and mediation (Abu-Lughod 2004, Friedman 1990, Ginsburg 1991). For Appadurai (1996), these new circumstances led to the world being figured as a global space of “flows.” Clifford (1997) suggested “a location” was “an itinerary rather than a bounded site” (p. 11). Augé (1995) distinguished anthropological places from those he termed nonplaces—airports, supermarkets, freeways; the everywhere–nowhere spaces of circulation, consumption, and communication.

As anthropologists have reached beyond discursive and representational frameworks of meaning, places have come to be figured as constellations of encounter and experience. For Casey (1995), places gather; for Ingold (2011), they are constituted in movement, the actions of wayfarers. For Stewart, place is something that “throws itself together,” “the effects of contingency, signifying density, and social location glimpsed at moments of tension, displacement, and deferral” (Stewart 1996, p. 139; 2012; see also Feld & Basso 1996, Howes 2005, Seremetakis 1994). For these scholars, place is neither found nor made but rather congealed out of diffuse phenomena, experienced in the moment, constantly becoming, including in ethnography (Pink 2008).

The preceding truncated discussion may misleadingly convey a sense of seamless paradigm shifts evolving from one naturalized conceptualization of place to another. Yet, the history of anthropology is one of vigorous contestations over the analytic cogency of emergent theorizations. A compelling critique of the phenomenological turn to experience, for example, argues that people and their relationships to places are not seen as socially, historically, or multiply mediated. As Myers puts it, people do not simply “experience the world; they are taught—indeed disciplined—to signify their experiences in distinctive ways” (Myers 2002, p. 103; Myers 2004). This line of argument continues to privilege practice as a primary unit of analysis, such that places are made in and through people’s interactions, the environments in which they live, and the institutions they generate, mobilize, and reproduce (Abu-Lughod 1997). But what can we make of contexts where anthropologists observe profound destabilization of social formations and symbolic orders? Vigh (2009) identifies a doubled mobility of persons and places at work in turbulent circumstances when persons and the places they inhabit are simultaneously rapidly transforming—circumstances that cannot be grasped through the relative stability of Bourdieu’s (1977) schema of the habitus. To take account of such circumstances Vigh proposes a model of social navigation.

The separation of representational practices and domains is collapsed altogether with the displacement of place by network. Network analysis emerged in the 1950s critique of structural

functionalism, most prominently in the work of British anthropologists Firth, Leach, and Turner, who wished to interrogate human actions and the bundles of relations and interlinkages that remained invisible in anthropologists' attention to higher-level social institutions (Boissevain 1979). In anthropologists' more recent take-up of the network under the influence of Deleuze (Deleuze 2005, Deleuze & Guattari 1987) and Latour (2005, 2014), there is a transcending of the category of place altogether (Oppenheim 2007, Tsing 2005). For Latour (1996), "literally there is nothing but networks" (p. 371). Actor network theory, he suggests, is a "powerful tool to destroy spheres and domains" (p. 379). Indeed, this is a large part of the analytic appeal of Latour's work—the transcendence of ostensibly outdated distinctions between nature and culture, human and non-human, representation and things (see also Thrift 2008)—which enables anthropologists to track all manner of mobile connections.

The logical consequences of precarious placemaking culminate most strikingly where the postrepresentational, posthumanist turn to perspectival ontology meets the Anthropocene, and anthropologists leave places behind altogether in the pursuit of "open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" (Tsing 2016, p. 23), engagements with atmosphere (Stewart 2011), and biosphere or hyperobject (Morton 2013)—"spaces untethered to worldly surfaces" (Howe 2015, p. 203). A focus on nonhuman forces that wreak vengeance and even the prospect of life in space (Battaglia et al. 2015) emerge as new "sites" at which anthropologists might "encounter the unencountered" (Howe 2015, p. 204). The identification of these "new frontiers," suggests Howe (2015, p. 206), calls for "a different game than that played by our anthropological ancestors."

On the face of it, the new figurings of ontology and network might be misrecognized as antithetical models for grappling with contemporary life. A closer look reveals them to share much common ground. Both emerge out of the work of Deleuze; both involve a refutation of hierarchical orders in favor of flattened fields of relations; both give focus to human and nonhuman interplay. Both are spatially conceived, the first infinitely open but all encompassing; the second bounded, closed. Both call attention to immanence and to affect, eschewing the terms of transformation and transcendence in favor of perpetual becoming. Within the terms of Latour's actor network theory (2005) and Viveiros de Castro's perspectival ontology (1998), concerns with relationships between the local and the global and questions of scale, domination, subjectivity, and agency are dissolved in favor of attention to assemblages. Space and environment emerge in these accounts as affects—"becomings that go beyond those who live through them" (Navaro-Yashin 2009, p. 12).

A paradox of this posthumanist turn is that while the world-changing circumstances of the present call out the need for new conceptualization, the models in question provide no vantage point from which to deal with the transformation itself. The network's flattened frame rejects large-scale historical change and periodization and does not recognize qualitative distinctions between forms of network or assemblage, not to mention other forms of social composition. Tully has suggested that Latour's model subsumes and "substantially modifies the prenetwork forms of subjectivity it includes" (Tully quoted in Cooper 2008, p. 322). As Cooper observes, in human history there has been only one kind of network that has allowed previously existing forms of social relationship to be dominated in such a way—the high-tech network, the network of information-driven capital (Cooper 2008, p. 312). This network might be better seen as a historically contingent "generalized condition of possibility" (Caddick 2016, p. 191) rather than as a neutral theoretical model through which life everywhere might be similarly understood.

The recent turn to ontology has similarly been observed as symptomatic of contemporary conditions (Kohn 2015), but also, paradoxically, as "uniquely unable to examine the fraught conditions of [its] flourishing" (Bessire & Bond 2014, p. 442). Celebrated as the new, radical, indeed critical, anthropology of our time (Hage 2012, Sahlins 2013), it marks a return to culture as bounded alterity (Candea 2007), a form of primitive society figured as a "new New World" (Hage 2012,



p. 303). As such, ontologists pursue a decolonizing political project, one that rescues incommensurable otherness from the ravages of neocolonial interculturalism. Yet, this is a political project without a theory of coexistence (Vigh & Sausdal 2014). Relations of domination that have historically structured coexistence also fall outside the frame (Neale & Vincent 2017). In insisting on bounded, assembled worlds, and on the idea of “indefinitely sustaining the possible” (Viveiros de Castro et al. 2014), ontologists offer material that is “good to think” but cannot reveal how their envisaged, radically new worlds might be brought into being.

## BEYOND ROOTLESSNESS

Is it possible to find a position of critical distance from which to grapple with these new meta-frameworks of network and ontology and, within them, what I have referred to as precarity’s tipping point? Looking to analysis that precedes the postmodernist and posthumanist turns for fresh perspectives on such matters might seem counterintuitive, but I want to make a case for the prescience of Mary Douglas’s (1970) engagement with linguist Basil Bernstein’s work on restricted and elaborated codes in her model of grid and group, the prelude to her later work on risk.<sup>1</sup> Douglas focuses on religion and antiritualism, but her analysis is ultimately directed toward understanding the interplay between relatively closed and open contexts of classification, interaction, and symbolic meaning. She figures the relationship between relative intensities of order, modeled as “grid,” and pressure, modeled as “group,” which distill in the relative strength of attachments to place or states of rootlessness (Douglas 1970, p. 156).

On one reading, Latourian models of network might correspond to Douglas’s idea of elaborated code: an open space of experience, feeling, and affect, where meaning-making is understood as radically attenuated—as compared with centralized social forms and institutions—and found only to circulate in process, resting only at the level of the individualized person and nodes of the network. Indeed, like the students of Paris 1968, whose protests motivated Douglas’s inquiry, Latour’s network explicitly rejects ritualism, along with the mediating institutions and symbolic order that are integral to the workings of restricted codes. Douglas observes incisively that the elaborated code out of which such protests arose is the hallmark of intellectual culture’s critical knowledge production and, along with it, a form of mobility that detaches its users “from their original community” (Douglas 1970, p. 32).

Ontological anthropology appears on first glance as an instantiation of Douglas’s restricted code, where condensed symbols order experience and meaning. If network is all affect, ontology is all pattern. In Bernstein’s own words, a restricted code “carries its own aesthetic. It will tend to develop a metaphoric range of considerable power, a simplicity and directness, a vitality and rhythm” (Bernstein quoted in Douglas 1970, p. 34). The new ontology’s boundedness, however, is transected by a network-like configuration that places human and nonhuman perspectives and interactions on the same plane. Douglas stresses that in any given context there will be a variety of restricted codes in play, coexisting with forms of elaborated code. In the intersection of codes, Douglas finds the means to identify and understand domination, as well as the relative autonomy of persons. She also recommends that “the whole history of ideas should be reviewed in the light of the power of social structures to generate symbols of their own” (Douglas 1970, p. 156). Might Douglas suggest that the new figures of network and ontology are functioning in our midst as natural systems?

<sup>1</sup>In taking up Douglas’s work at this juncture, I am inspired by the unpublished lectures of the late Geoff Sharp, Australian social theorist and general editor of *Arena*.

Douglas's comparative model critically illustrates how social relations might be differently configured, scaled, and socially emplaced across various contexts. In the interplay between restricted and elaborated codes she examines how networks are held in check or cut across by other formations. Douglas's approach resonates with the question Povinelli (2016) poses to Deleuze's category of assemblage, when she asks, "What is the concept of assemblage smuggling in as it is being deployed to solve the power of norm-making in a postsubject world?" (p. 100). Povinelli goes on to answer emphatically with respect to her own ethnography: an entity, *Tjipel*, is "here" and "this"—a specific formation, an intersection or assemblage "only as long as she is an intersection of entities oriented to each other" (Povinelli 2016, p. 103). Navaro-Yashin (2009, p. 14) similarly qualifies Latour's flattened network, suggesting that it be transposed to three dimensions with the introduction of a theory of sovereignty and history. These anthropologists remind us that in any of the places we might be drawn to operationalize a network framework of analysis, "a common backcloth of assumptions" (Douglas 1970, p. 55) orients people to each other and to environments in ways that are distinctively ordered and constrained, notwithstanding whatever turmoil might be at play.

Two vital tasks confronting anthropologists wherever precarity is apparent are (a) the documentation of the coexistence of differently ordered and contested modes of orientation to places and their interlinked forms of engagement with the world and (b) an accounting, where possible, of the historically contingent nature of newly emergent classificatory forms, or their absence, so as to reveal what is at stake in these transformations for the peoples with whom we work. Adopting an interpretive framework that assumes openness and eschews hierarchy at the outset risks misrecognizing the multiple forms of constraint at play in any situation. Openness, like globalization before it, can be figured ideologically. It can be perceived as an ontological threat, indeed a new form of ontological imperialism (Cooper 2008, p. 321), by those who would privilege and live by more closed orientations as vital elements of what it is to be human.

This discussion returns us to the distinction between the generalized condition of precariousness in human relations and historically specific precarity. Network and ontological anthropologies fail to recognize that their frameworks of analysis are artifacts of our times. They are thus endowed with compelling capacities to speak to contemporary sensibilities but offer no scope for interpreting the circumstances out of which they arise. To mount such a critique is by no means to reject the insights and interpretive possibilities of network and ontology (Graeber 2015, Strathern 1996). It is rather a matter of how, in the midst of the new, we can distinguish the new from what is abiding: enduring forms of kinship, for example [Stanner 1979 (1958)]; transformations in spatial prohibitions (Munn 1996); colonialism's legacies carried forward (Stoler 2013); elements of culture Chakrabarty (2000, pp. 111–13) might describe as "timeknots." Furthermore, at a time when future-focused thinking has become an urgent political project, a genuinely transformative anthropology is well placed to help sort out "what forms of life must be defended from present contingencies and what must be set adrift" (Bessire & Bond 2014, p. 442).

## CONSTELLATIONS OF PRECARIOUS PLACEMAKING

I have argued that a critical anthropology can be fully realized only by adopting a multidimensional set of perspectives that enable coexistent, qualitatively different ways of relating to places to be identified. In the final section of this review, I explore two lines of inquiry, two constellations of approach that enable precarity's tipping point to be held in view. Each engages a contradictory, turbulent phenomenon of the present: practices and processes of creative destruction, and the imaging of the not-yet-known.



## Creative Destruction and the Arts of Governance

Creative destruction, the unmaking of places and the social orders and cosmological frameworks through which places were inhabited and known, is integral to colonial, settler-colonial, and capitalist practices [Harvey 1982, Marx 1976 (1867)]. The emergence of precarity follows the cleaving of differently organized economic orders; the intergenerational effects of colonial formations (Stoler 2013); the globalization of capital; its reconfigurations in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis; the post-Fordist neoliberal turn (Fortun 2014; Gregory 2014; Harker 2012). Harvey's (1982) project, to understand "how capital builds a geographical landscape in its own image at a certain point in time only to have to destroy it later to accommodate its own dynamic of endless capital accumulation" (p. 425), speaks directly to the post-Fordist versions of precarity. But it also addresses the long view of colonial capitalism. As Harvey observes, much "of the extraordinary transformation of the earth's surface these last 200 years reflects precisely the putting into practice of the free-market utopianism of process and *its restless and perpetual reorganizations of spatial forms*" (Harvey 2000, pp. 177–78, emphasis added).

The unmaking of place is devastatingly familiar to indigenous people; it is experienced either as flows of processes and pressures or more sharply as distinct events of structural violence. Settler-colonial states practice the elimination of native peoples—the forced movement of prior peoples wherever they stand in the way of development—while simultaneously subjecting them to new orders of governance, subjectivity (Collins 2013, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Li 2007, Trouillot 2003), and regimes of visibility (Mirzoeff 2011, Scott 1998). The same state regimes that refuse the alterities of indigenous subjects energetically pursue the commercialization of those elements of indigeneity that are useful to nation-making projects (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). Anthropologists working in these contexts interrogate complexly layered social and political histories of violence (Bessire 2014b, Povinelli 2002, Taussig 1980) and of migration, displacement, and resettlement (Colson 2003, Malkki 1995); they sometimes identify surprising affinities between the dynamics of capitalism and indigenous regimes (e.g., de L'Estoile 2014, Hébert 2015).

The unmaking of place is also experienced as the decisive wielding of symbolic power in contexts where anthropologists render legible the contesting of representational orders (Fisher 2016, Hinkson 2010, Wacquant 2007) and sovereignties (Coulthard 2014, Simpson 2014) and the legitimization of state violence (Caton 2006, Feldman 2005). These processes are often revealed as multilayered, such as in the symbiotic relationship in contests over the securing of shelter, territory, citizenship, and public participation (Azoulay 2013, Bourgois & Schonberg 2009, Lea & Pholeros 2012) or in the experience of refugees "hierarchically interconnected with the space/place of both origin and exile" (Peteet cited in Colson 2003, p. 10; Geshiere 2009).

In an era of climate change, places are now seen as most decisively under threat not by states but by "their noxious side effects" (Lipset 2014, Crate 2011). The Anthropocene "calls views of 'place,' in each and every register, into question" (Lipset 2014, p. 217). Lipset argues that "Anthropocene ethnography must first and foremost acknowledge the prospect . . . of place loss, the loss of sovereignty, loss of property, and loss of identity," and the evacuation of government and other institutions (p. 238). These are the themes compellingly discussed in Teaiwa's (2014) ethnography of the tiny Pacific island of Banaba, where colonial capitalism has been experienced in two waves: first, in the early-twentieth-century phosphate mining that reduced the island to "a flow of rocks with multiple trajectories and itineraries," (p. 11) and second, a century later, where rising sea levels threaten to sink Banabans' island. Teaiwa tracks the cultivation of a scientific imaginary for fertilizer, the history of the phosphate company, and the dispossession and relocation of people. Her study conceptually enacts a distributed agency but ultimately privileges the perspectives of Banaban people who face a newly precarious future with the prospect of their places disappearing altogether.

## Moving Places: Images, Myths, Stories of the Not-Yet-Known

Precarity—as the ontological disembedding of people from distinctively place-based associations—can be traced through the evolution of the twinned processes of ontological insecurity and reflexive subjectivity analyzed by social theorists in the 1990s (Bauman 1996, Beck 1992, Giddens 1991) as the cornerstones of technologically accelerated capitalism. Thus, Appadurai (1996) observes that in late modernity the work of imagination falls to the reflexive, interpretive individual, the subject who can see “bi-focally” (Durham-Peters 1997, Seremetakis 2009) or simultaneously experience “here and elsewhere” [Benjamin 2008 (1933), Manoukian 2010]. With respect to these processes, anthropologists describe multiple forms of contradiction, including the knowing-but-not-acting that characterizes “political ecologies of the precarious” that “seduce people into participating in their own demise, often in the guise of working against it” (Weston 2012, p. 434).

Across fields of crisis, disorder, and violent destruction, anthropologists observe an urgent “drive to picture” (Spyer 2013, Taussig 2011). In the postwar turmoil of Ambon, images function as “landscapes,” or “deep gatherings,” that can “still a world in restless and, at times, terrifying motion and re-establish and secure the familiar terms of quotidian existence” (Spyer 2013, p. 103). The rapid speed of digitally networked image production and circulation can also have the inverse effect, accelerating the tempo of social interaction and compounding atmospheres pervaded by anxiety and instability (Miller 2011, Vaarzon-Morel 2012). Fleeting images of alternative possible lives feed the imaginations of aspiring cosmopolitans, fueling tensions with older kin and traditionalist neighbors (Seremetakis 1994, Sorge 2015). Anthropologists document the interleaving of symbolic orders and clashes of image regimes (Ginsburg et al. 2002, Spyer & Steedly 2013) and witness the processes by which old and new images, and old and new myths, help bring into being the transforming worlds of which they are a part (Abu-Lughod 2004, Comaroff & Comaroff 2001, LiPuma 2001).

To take tangible form and be made meaningful, images have to be encountered by people—someone, somewhere, in specifically mediated form (Belting 2011). Attending to the distinctive tones, tempos, and narratives of contemporary place-based experience through writing (Biehl 2005; Stewart 2011), drawing (Eickelkamp 2011, Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, Hinkson 2014, Taussig 2011), and digital imaging (Deger 2013), anthropologists also grapple with intergenerational differences in ways of seeing (Bessire 2014a); with the contradictory coexistence of pre- and postrepresentational orders (Myers 2012); and with their own entanglements in the politics of representation. Anthropologists are uniquely placed to track the grounding of abstractions in local processes of meaning-making (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003). Compelling anthropologies of precarity convey the sense and spirit of transforming modes of storytelling and picturing, as well as the ways in which erstwhile cultural forms get stretched as they are mobilized across space and time (Caton 2013).

Crucial to understanding the specificities of the present are the structured networks of digital mediation that give special character to the movement of capital (Ho 2009, Truitt 2013) and to new forms of politics and public spheres (Bernal 2005, Bishara 2008), as well as enabling technologically extended interactions where affinities, anxieties, and imaginaries are distributed, fostered, and felt with galvanizing force (Banki 2013, Stewart 2012, Weston 2012). Technological mediation radically widens the frame of possible lives that people might imagine or to which they might aspire—the worlds in which they might envisage a future for themselves. In showing how new subjective imaginaries are articulated and circulated, anthropologists also demonstrate the limits, hierarchies, and inequalities of network-based experience (Miller 2011, Strathern 1996); the failure of utopian technological imaginaries to be realized on the ground (Green et al. 2005);

commitments to localized neighborhoods; and the privileging of face-to-face interaction as a distinctively valued setting for exchange (Gershon 2010, Spitulnik Vidali 2013).

## CONCLUSION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL TACTICS IN THE TIME OF PRECARIY

The turn to precarity emerges in tandem with the rise of posthumanist perspectives, most prominently modeled as network and ontology. These frameworks provide vital new angles from which to explore some contemporary dimensions of the making and unmaking of places and associated forms of life. However, in effectively evacuating structure, history, power, and subjectivity, network and ontology immerse us in the instabilities of the status quo rather than helping us understand how we—collectively and distinctively—have come, and are coming, to be, here. My modest aim in this review has been to argue for conceptual approaches that hold the tipping points of spatial and conceptual transformations in view together. I have suggested that Douglas provides one compelling perspective on these matters from the other side of the posthumanist turn. The need to attend to abiding structuring processes does not dissipate, even as anthropology's fields leave the surface of the earth and travel to cyberspace or even outer space. As Battaglia et al. (2015) see it, "The challenge . . . is both to hold onto what our analyses of racialization and colonialism, for example, have shown us, while allowing ourselves, simultaneously, to imagine, critique, and engage those new forms—liberatory or exploitative—that could emerge" (p. 248).

In conclusion, I return briefly to the case with which this article opened, where precarity's tipping point was made visible in the turbulent circumstances of a long-standing interfamily feud coinciding with a shift in the governance of Aboriginal lives. In the fallout associated with these troubles, one of my closest friends was exiled from her hometown in Central Australia. For the past three years, she has been immersed in the emotionally charged and energetic practices of placemaking, making herself at home in a radically different situation as a matter of existential survival. In a restless tussle between here and there, Nungarrayi makes her new "home" by willing her new surroundings to affectively adopt recognized features of her beloved desert country. She looks for and insists on certain continuities between here and there. She insists that she has freely chosen to be here and has developed a well-honed narrative on the liberation afforded by living at a distance from the dense sociality of the desert.

As I watch Nungarrayi make her way, negotiating the terms of her new domestic relationship with a Nepalese asylum-seeker who had recently arrived in Australia, navigating a new city with its complex mix of ethnic communities and diverse and conflicting image-worlds, becoming accustomed to long hours of solitude in a suburban house, feeling her way in a newly slimmed-down body (the result of radical changes in diet), I am aware that I am observing a person in the process of becoming. Yet, as she wills herself to hold fast to the promise of future-focused transformation, Nungarrayi wrestles with dramatic mood swings, between elation and distress, becoming and unraveling. Her demeanor is rapid-paced, anxious, and urgent, in marked contrast to the steady person I befriended 20 years ago. She dwells with fragile intensity in childhood memories that have become vivid and supercharged—episodic memories of places she owns through genealogical inheritance and knows intimately through personal history, ceremony, song, and story. These memories signal an ontological anchorage and related reciprocal social order that authorizes Nungarrayi to return to her people and place of birth from time to time, despite eviction, to participate in the rites of bereavement that attend the all-too-often deaths of relatives. She invokes such authorizations, but has not yet tested them out.

Nungarrayi holds tight to dense extended kinship relationships that center on the desert but now radiate outward in newly attenuated networks across an ever-expanding field. She dwells in

retrotopic (Bauman 2017) grief for possibilities lost in the shifting governance regimes at play in her hometown. She speaks on her mobile phone every day to her cherished son, in prison thousands of kilometers to the north, and keeps an eye on Facebook for news of dispersed family. Her most treasured possessions are photographic images, videos, and music files carried on tiny memory cards. She dreams of finding meaningful work and buying a house but, as an unemployed person, struggles to get by day to day on her modest unemployment benefit. She is free of the near-constant police surveillance endured by her kin in regional towns, but she spent Christmas night in the lock-up. She must summon considerable energy to put forward her newly autonomous self every time she leaves her house. As she looks to the future, she rails, in great anger and frustration, against the punitive bureaucratic constraints and institutional racism brought to bear on her as a welfare-dependent Aboriginal person. These constraints follow her everywhere she goes.

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## Errata

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