Narratives of 'stuckness' among North-to-South academic migrants in Thailand: Interrogating normative logics and global power asymmetries of transnational academic migration

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) researchers have become increasingly interested in transnational academic mobility as a field of inquiry. A phenomenon frequently associated with 'progress' and 'development', research accounts are written about academic migrants who harness career momentum and experience upward social mobility resulting from their travels. In contrast to scholarly accounts which link mobility with progress of many kinds, this article foregrounds under-considered accounts of migrant academics who describe themselves as moving 'backwards' and feeling 'stuck'. Drawing on an empirical study with 25 migrant academics employed in Thailand, we investigate 'stuckness' via two narratives of Global North academics. These narrative portraits reveal how migration may be prompted by career immobilities, and that migrant academics in Thailand may perceive that they lack opportunities for career progression. We also examine how Thailand is configured as a 'weird' mobility destination, one that may struggle for recognition as a site for international academic career progress. The key contribution we make to critical academic mobilities scholarship is to weave in decolonial analyses of the geopolitics of knowledge production, examining 'South' and 'stuckness' as potentially linked categories for North-to-South academic migrants. We argue that narratives of stuckness among Northern academic migrants in Thailand are deeply interwoven with assumptions made about desirable directions of global travel; assumptions which are born from the profound inequalities which characterise global HE's core/periphery structure.

Keywords: academic migration; Global South; internationalisation; immobility; Southern Theory; stuckness; Thailand

Introduction: Progress, development and other academic mobility norms

Cross-border movement is an ancient practice within the academic profession. Since the emergence of universities, scholars have wandered in search of new knowledge, career opportunities, or sometimes out of harm's way (Welch 1997). While cross-border travel is a thread that can be traced across the history of higher education (HE), contemporary academic migration is shaped by new discourses and drivers, such as internationalisation and the knowledge economy, which have seen more scholars on the move than ever before. Across many national contexts there is a growing disjuncture between, on the one hand, calls to limit immigration particularly for so-

called 'low-skilled' migrants, and on the other, talent wars for the 'highly skilled' (Fahey and Kenway 2010). Increasingly, national and regional policymakers alike have encouraged academic migration with the hope that any resulting research and innovation will drive economic expansion (Tremblay 2005), internationalise teaching and learning (Qiang 2003), and contribute to regional integration (Enders 1998).

While academic migration is normatively configured as beneficial and unproblematic within mainstream policy discourse (Balaban 2018), a growing body of critical scholarship troubles this assurance (Fahey and Kenway 2010; Henderson 2019; Morley et al. 2018; Robertson 2010). Researchers have questioned the universal benefits that mobility is said to put in motion and have drawn attention to its uneven 'opportunity structures' (Morley et al. 2018, p. 537), which tend to be distributed along intersecting axes of social difference. These studies, described as a 'Critical Academic Mobilities Approach' or CAMA (Henderson 2019), argue that academic movement may be bound up with disturbance, unpredictable outcomes, and profound inequities. To date, much CAMA research has foregrounded two broad academic migration contexts: North-to-North and South-to-North. However, there is growing evidence of a rise in 'reverse flow' migration of academics from the Global North—the 'core' of knowledge production—to the Global South[1], its 'periphery' (Kim 2015; Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018). This article attends to this gap in CAMA scholarship, subjecting North-to-South academic migration to further critical interrogation by examining narrative portraits from a wider empirical study involving 25 migrant academics working in Thailand.

In addition to highlighting a relatively under-considered context, in this article we offer a related conceptual contribution. We connect existing CAMA scholarship, which troubles habitual accounts of academic mobility as an 'unconditional good' (Morley et al. 2018), with a body of decolonial research that has interrogated the geopolitics of knowledge production (Connell 2007, 2017; Shahjahan 2016). Bringing together these bodies of scholarship enables a theorisation of 'stuckness' and the 'Global South' as linked categories within the global HE economy. Through a close analysis of two narrative accounts of 'stuck' academic migrants in Thailand, we reveal how unequal North-to-South power relations implicitly centre the Global North as the normative core of knowledge production, in turn positioning movements to the 'periphery' of the global HE economy as 'weird', 'backward', and linked with career 'stuckness' or regression. While previous scholarly accounts have interrogated the global power relations which see academic 'success' and 'progress' defined from the perspective of the Global North (e.g. Connell 2017), this article reveals

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[1] Following Manathunga (2014), we acknowledge that ideas like 'North' and 'South' are 'highly problematic and binary terms' (p. 4) which have the capacity to essentialise and generalise. However, we proceed with using these terms with the acknowledgement that we are 'always limited by the categories that we work with and the language that we use' (Manathunga 2014, p. 5), and that these terms help us to 'foreground the colonial relations of power that continue to shape the geopolitical realities of our contemporary world' (p. 4).

how these often unquestioned norms are reproduced when Northern academic migrants move South.

Literature review: A review of critical approaches to academic mobility research

Certain habits of thought tend to structure the presence of academic migration within the wider HE research imaginary. As Robertson (2010) notes, academic mobility is often 'conceived of as a positive force; a powerful mechanism of social change' (p. 642). For example, mobility is frequently associated with *progress* (Teichler 2015), with individuals said to gain 'status and various forms of capital' (Bauder 2015, p. 8) as well as enhanced research productivity (Karmaeva 2018). It is also commonly linked with *development,* where working abroad is said to facilitate professional development, via 'new knowledge, techniques and theory' (Groves, López and Carvalho 2018, p. 94) and more diverse international professional networks (Uusimaki and Garvis 2017). Mobility is also tied to 'development' in another sense, with returnees often configured as potential development agents in the Global South (Altbach and Teichler 2001). It is not only individuals who are tagged as beneficiaries of academic mobility; institutions which hire academic migrants are also said to strengthen their research culture, improve teaching and learning, promote interculturalism, and encourage opportunities for research partnerships across linguistic and cultural divides (Groves, López and Carvalho 2018). Reading across the wider HE literature, it is clear that there is a tendency to construct mobility as a 'good' within the academic profession—'a form of desirable capital for institutions and individuals' (Morley et al 2018, p. 538).

However, there is now a critical body of academic mobilities research which has sought to denaturalise 'progress' and 'development' narratives (Morley et al. 2018; Morley, Leyton and Hada 2019). Cautioning against 'an overly romantic rendering of mobility' (Robertson 2010, p. 642), CAMA researchers have called for 'the framing of mobility as an unquestioned universal good [to] be critiqued' (Henderson 2019, p. 681). For example, scholars have foregrounded questions of motility, or the capacity to choose to be mobile. As Henderson argues, mobile academic subjectivity is 'structurally determined through inequalities of access to mobility and/or stability' (Henderson 2019, p. 681), which can lead to uneven distributions of the benefits of mobility along axes of social difference, such as nationality, gender, ethnicity and class. Cutting edge critical accounts have described 'problematic' (Fahey and Kenway 2010) and 'discrepant' (Collins and Ho 2018) academic mobility practices, and have attended to its capacities for 'disconnection' (Balaban 2018). These nuanced characterisations form a helpful platform for this current article to depart from.

Within existing studies of academic mobility, it is clear that migration within the Global North and from South-to-North has received greater consideration. The emphasis on such movements is likely related to common academic migration patterns, from the 'periphery' to the 'core' of the global HE economy (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018). To date, there has been limited consideration

of the experiences of academics engaged in North-to-South migration, what is sometimes called 'reverse flow' migration (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018). However, North-to-South migration is an increasingly important phenomenon because of wider contextual changes within the global HE sector. Reductions in state funding for HE, an expanding number of doctoral graduates, and the increasing casualisation of academic labour have led to highly competitive academic job markets in many nations of the Global North. The confluence of these phenomena has left many Northern doctoral graduates stranded in precarious academic work or searching for alternative career possibilities both inside and outside of academe (Mewburn, Grant, Suominen and Kizimchuk 2018). At this point, researchers (perhaps with the exception of Kim 2015) have yet to fully consider whether these contextual features are contributing to increasing 'reverse flow mobility' to the Global South, where there are reports of higher demand for doctoral graduates (Pacheco 2015).

In order to offer a Southern contribution to CAMA scholarship, and to better understand the subjective experience of North-to-South academic migration, we have situated our investigation in the Thai context. Thailand is a country that is both peripherally situated in the global economy of knowledge production (Juntrasook and Burford 2017), and not commonly viewed as a popular receiving destination for academic migrants (Burford, Koompraphant and Jirathanapiwat 2020). Unlike other Asian nations such as Korea (Froese 2012), China (Kim 2017), and Japan (Huang 2018), which have implemented national strategies to attract academic migrants, there has been an absence of policy direction in Thailand surrounding the role of human capital in HE internationalisation efforts (Burford, Uerpairojkit, Eppolite and Vachananda 2019). Currently, migration to Thailand may be said to represent a 'non-traditional career pathway' (Lee and Kuzhabekova 2018, p. 370) and 'an unusual flow' (Howard 2009, p. 193) for Northern academics. In our participants' words (introduced below), academic migration to Thailand may be considered 'unusual', 'accidental' or a 'weird path'. In contrast to narratives of progress, development and intentionality that are habitually reproduced in academic mobilities scholarship, many academic migrants see themselves as 'washed up' in Thailand or find themselves somehow 'stuck' in work there. As we will outline in this paper, for some migrant academics 'Thailand' itself may figure as a paradoxical mobility destination—one that is associated with stuckness. In order to unpack such 'stuckness' narratives, the following section introduces a body of decolonial research that has interrogated the geopolitics of HE and knowledge production.

Conceptualising 'South' and 'stuckness' in North-to-South academic migration

As we declared above, our goal in this article is to contribute to CAMA scholarship by investigating narratives of 'stuckness' in the accounts of Northern academic migrants working in Thailand. Such a focus enables us to attend to an under-considered location for academic mobilities research and to destabilise norms which associate academic migration with progress and development. However, another key goal of our article is to critically interrogate *why* it is that the Global South in general—Thailand in particular—appears to be configured as a 'backwards' place

where Northern academic migrants might feel 'stuck'. In order to accomplish each of our aims, we employ two key concepts: 'stuckness' and 'Southern Theory'. By drawing these tools together we hope to offer an account of how and why felt experiences of 'stuckness' may be intertwined with the inequitable geopolitics of knowledge production.

The first concept that we use to undertake our analytical work is *stuckness*. In taking up *stuck* as a concept we extend some existing considerations about stuck academics, which have examined the gendering of academic careers. For example, researchers have noted points where women tend to get 'stuck' within the academic hierarchy (Merritt 2000; Ogbogu 2011), as well as with 'the responsibility of domestic and caring issues' (Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra 2013, p. 283). In previous studies of academic mobility, 'stuckness' is connected to foreign academics who are 'stuck in hourly paid part-time jobs' (Kim 2009, p. 397), or those who are 'stuck' in a country they have migrated to because they have school-aged children (Chen 2017). We use the term 'stuck' to describe experiences where mobile subjects encounter constraint and see limited opportunities to move out, upward, or forward. Of course, to speak of stuckness and mobilities together is to engage a paradox: if mobilities are about movement, stuckness is often interpreted as movement's polar opposite. Stuckness impedes movement; it is about people that are immobile or situations that are jammed. In this article we follow the hunch that something interesting happens when mobility itself is configured as a block to movement.

The second concept, 'South', emerges from decolonial scholarship which has argued that the present arrangement of the global HE economy is profoundly shaped by histories of imperialism (e.g. Ma Rhea 2017; Motsa 2017). Decolonial scholars have argued that the current economy of HE mirrors the global material economy, with a hegemonic core (the Global North) and a periphery (the Global South). This asymmetrical relationship is rooted in European imperialism, and its practices of violent theft and suppression, which produce ongoing dividends for nations in the Global North. We animate 'Southern Theories' (Connell 2007; 2017), understanding this as a conceptual resource closely connected to ideas of epistemic in/justice (Walker 2018) and the geopolitics of knowledge production (Shahjahan 2016). Southern theories highlight the intellectual dividends that colonial histories have produced, and help explain the ongoing power asymmetries which are a feature of the global economy of knowledge production. For example, today the Global North hosts not only most of the world's resources for research, it is also normatively positioned as the home of advanced theory and scientific innovation (Connell 2017). In contrast, the Global South is normatively positioned as a periphery; a location for data collection and a context for the application of Northern theory. This global power asymmetry works to devalue and delegitimise forms of organised knowledge that exist in post- and semi-colonial settings, such as Thailand.

Although it was never formally colonised, Siam, later known as Thailand, came under the global influence of European powers from the mid-19th century (Jackson 2007). As Jackson (2007) notes, the 'development of Thailand's economy, polity, culture and social structure were all deeply impacted by western imperialism in ways very similar to the situation in a direct colony' (p. 331). Thailand's 'semicolonial' history (Jackson 2007) has produced ongoing effects in terms of the

development of its HE system and its national position within the global knowledge economy. Thai knowledge systems struggle for recognition in a context where Thai intellectual workers are themselves often oriented to sources of intellectual authority outside of their own society (Juntrasook and Burford 2017). Thai universities are, on the whole, not highly placed in global university rankings which purport to measure 'success'; a notion which privileges Global North knowledge systems and institutions.

When academic migrants move from North-to-South they do not travel in a vacuum; Thailand's position in the geopolitical structure of global HE is well-known. Given this context, Northern migrations 'South' may be read as movements away from institutions associated with advanced knowledge. This can produce difficulties: how can academics make sense of, and account for, their movements, having apparently moved 'down' rather than 'up' within HE's prestige economy? Some migrants may fear that their movements make it difficult for them to return home, or feel stuck because the location they have moved to will not provide them with opportunities for career development. Others may find that achievements in their academic career in the Global South are not recognised as equivalent in prestige to those in other locations. Some academics may even fear that moving South 'sticks' to their academic identities and future career prospects. The associations that circulate around 'Southern' universities, and the Northern academics who migrate to work at them, are therefore of particular interest for this study.

The research project: Becoming *aa-jaan dtàang châat*

This study forms part of a larger project entitled 'Be(com)ing *aa-jaan dtàang châat*' that aims to explore the experiences of migrant academics employed in the Thai HE system. *Aa-jaan dtàang châat* (อาจารย์ต่างชาติ) is the Thai language concept that describes non-Thai academics who work in the country. Following institutional ethical board approval, this wider study was conducted in Thailand between October 2017 and May 2018. It involved semi-structured interviews with 25 participants, all of whom were current or past employees of Thai universities[2].

In total seven women and eighteen men were interviewed for the study. While the recruitment of academic women in this study is low, this number may reflect the gender asymmetry among academic migrants in Thailand more broadly. Participants taught in a variety of disciplines: languages and humanities (9), social sciences (14), natural sciences (1), and formal sciences (1).

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[2] The question of how to define the movements of people across national borders is a topic of ongoing debate (see Douglas, Cetron, and Spiegel 2019) In this paper we use the term 'migrant' as a general term to describe the movement of persons between countries. Our focus is fixed on transnational migration rather than internal migration within Thailand itself. We have defined the status of 'academic' in a capacious way so as to include all individuals who work as researchers and/or teachers at Thai HE institutions. This includes individuals who occupy what are seen in the Global North as 'traditional' academic roles (research, teaching and service expectations) as well as those in research-only or teaching-only roles. While some might question whether participants without PhDs achieve recognition as 'academics', it is important to understand that within the Thai context this is not unusual, and such individuals would still be described as '*aa-jaan dtàang châat'* or foreign academics. Our definition of 'academic migrants' also includes those who were not employed as academics prior to their migration to Thailand.

The participant group was mixed in terms of whether they held a doctoral degree (12) or did not (13). All of our participants were self-initiated expatriates.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and lasted on average 90 minutes. Interviews consisted of questions about the participants' backgrounds, as well as open-ended questions about their workplace context, their academic journey, and their experiences of teaching, research, and service at Thai universities. Our research posed some ethical challenges regarding protection of participants' anonymity when individuals may be easily identifiable among the relatively small community of *aa-jaan dtàang châat* in Thailand. For the purposes of anonymity, names, institutions, and disciplinary areas have not been reported in this article.

Analytic procedure

The analytic procedure for the study was as follows. Each analyst independently and repeatedly read through the corpus of transcripts and began to identify patterns across the dataset. The scope of our analysis was confined to our research objective: to understand 'stuckness' in the context of academic mobility. Therefore, our initial analytic work focused on identifying moments in the data where academic mobility appeared to be associated with impediments to movement or progression. Reading across our dataset we found that the degree to which our participants experienced constraint varied. Most participants reported actively choosing to move to Thailand, and that selecting an academic position in Thailand was one among many possible choices. Participants reported moving because they wanted a fresh challenge, proximity to a research field or disciplinary area, opportunities for research funding, or the opportunity to raise a family or develop a relationship. While most of our participants did not appear to be especially 'stuck' before moving to Thailand, a minority had made migration decisions within a web of constraints. As analysts, it is challenging to classify participants within a binary of 'stuck' or 'not', as constraint on movement and agency is something that all individuals experience. However, we can state broadly that approximately half of our cohort characterised their experience as not meeting their career expectations. Common obstacles which led to dissatisfaction with careers in Thailand included a lack of professional learning opportunities, limited domestic career progression, a sense of marginality within institutions, struggles with the climate and pollution, an inability to fully participate in broader social life, and concerns that academic work in Thailand was not viewed as equivalent to other contexts when seeking employment overseas.

In an effort to highlight exemplary cases of 'stuckness' we offer two narrative portraits. We selected a narrative approach to analysis in order to present complex experiences of 'stuckness'. As analysts, we felt that the stories told in interviews were best kept intact as storied data rather than dispersed throughout the analysis thematically. Narrative analysis helps to '[reveal] a great deal about the socio-cultural fabric of lives, subjectivity, feelings, agency, and the multi-layered nature of human experience over time and in different sets of circumstances' (Sparkes and Smith 2013, p. 131). Stories act as prisms (Sparkes and Smith 2013) for analysts to investigate the process

by which individuals constitute and communicate meanings. Using a narrative approach to present our data allowed us to reveal how the felt experience of stuckness may be intensified when 'stuck situations' become clumped together. However, it is not our intention to imply that narratives of two men in their 30s reflect the experiences of our much more diverse sample, including seven women. While this article is deliberately narrowly focused on stuckness, it is one part of a broader body of work emerging from this project; other publications address the experiences of our diverse range of participants more comprehensively (see Eppolite and Burford 2020).

In the next section we present two narratives, of 'Darcy' and 'Jason'. These are followed by an analysis which unpacks the key elements of stuckness in these narrative cases and interrogates assumptions made about power asymmetries between the Global South and North.

Darcy's story: Stuckness as a catalyst for the 'weird path' of migration to Thailand

At the time of our research interview Darcy described himself as a heterosexual, white, man in his mid-30s from a European country. Darcy undertook his studies in a scientific discipline at two prestigious universities in Europe, and now worked at one of Thailand's most prestigious universities. Working in Thailand was Darcy's first academic posting. At the outset of the interview Darcy expressed his disappointment with his current career situation. His movement to Thailand was prompted by a 'pretty dire' job market in his home country. Darcy began his migration narrative by situating it in the search for a postdoctoral position toward the end of his PhD. While he found one promising position, a delay with his viva caused him to become ineligible. This early setback left Darcy feeling 'a little bit disillusioned'. While he was enrolled in his doctorate Darcy had begun a relationship with a Thai partner who was an international student studying in the same country. Finding himself caught between a difficult job market at home and visa challenges for his partner, the couple made the decision to move to Thailand together.

Throughout the interview Darcy variously described his mobility as a 'weird path', 'pretty rare' and an 'unusual progression'. Tellingly, he contrasted his capacity to make career decisions to another colleague who had also migrated from the Global North, describing him as in a 'very different' situation in terms of family life and academic rank. However, another difference between the two was that Darcy's colleague 'decided to move to Thailand... he came kind of by choice'. While Darcy could acknowledge that he did make some choices, he set these within a more limited field of manoeuvrability: 'at that time, I probably wasn't going to uh, to get a job in [home country] at the time. So, my deciding to come was kind of different, different from his'.

Upon arriving in Thailand, Darcy had difficulty securing an academic position: 'I spent a few months not really doing anything, then a few months unsuccessfully kind of sending out feelers'. His arrival also coincided with political turbulence leading up to a coup d'état in the country, which

added complexity to the job search. With the support of his former doctoral supervisor, Darcy managed to contact some relevant departments and was eventually offered a position the year after his arrival.

Darcy reported feeling glad that he moved with his partner, and they later married. However, he soon became dissatisfied with his new life in Thailand:

> There's too much wrong… I mean there's stuff wrong everywhere, but you read the paper in Thailand, every day it's like "Ugh, how is this happening?"...I find it makes me angry every time I read it. And there's nothing you can really do about it. Yeah, I guess everywhere, everywhere has problems, but in Thailand they seem to be worse.

According to Darcy, there were many things not to like about life in Thailand: the climate was uncomfortable and inconvenient, the pollution gave him a sore throat and eyes, the traffic was constant, and it was difficult to walk around.

Regarding his career, Darcy also found few things to enjoy. He did find that he was able to progress his research and got some satisfaction of thinking of himself as 'being like, on the frontier, like bringing some of the academic culture I grew up with...like I represent the [disciplinary] establishment, in a way (laughs)'. However, the list of things Darcy did not enjoy about his career in Thailand was equally lengthy: a four-hour daily commute, the requirement to be present during office hours, working in a cubicle office, the need to clock in with a thumb scanner, unsatisfying teaching, and an overabundance of meetings. While he had tried to challenge some of these conditions through some 'old-school lefty agitation' and by refusing to attend particular meetings and events, Darcy had not been able to ignite a rebellious passion among his colleagues.

While minor irritations appeared to accumulate, Darcy's stuckness was most strongly discernable in moments where he described his movement to Thailand as a professionally backwards step: 'for me I guess it's pretty much all, all negatives in terms of uh, my academic development... there's virtually no one here doing the same thing'. As single-blind review processes are typical for the discipline Darcy works in, this prompted questions about how other academics may perceive his affiliation:

> I feel a bit ashamed to be working here. Whenever I send off a paper, I don't really like the fact that it says ... [current institution] on the paper, that the first response to anyone looking at it is gonna be ... It's gonna make them wary... I mean I know this because I do it too when I get a paper for review.

Later in the interview Darcy again described a feeling of shame relating to his academic position in Thailand:

Yeah. I mean I'm kind of ashamed to work here. I mean (laughs) It's kind of arrogant to say so. But I do feel that. I mean, yeah, so I did my undergrad at [prestigious European institution], so pretty famous. I did my PhD at [prestigious European institution], which was pretty famous, and then I do kind of think, how did I end up...what am I doing?

In the second part of the extract above we can also read surprise, or possibly incoherence in the movement that Darcy has made: 'how did I end up [here]? what am I doing?'. While Darcy was unsatisfied with his current career situation, he characterised his other options as slim:

I'm kind of in a slightly awkward position for that, because I think I'm, I'm too qualified for, for a postdoc.... Because my PhD was five years ago, uh, that discounts me from a lot... But also, I don't think I'm competitive for like a good lecturer job in [home country] at the moment. Uh, because I had a couple of years out ... I mean I have to catch up from that...And also, I mean the, the job market is still, still terrible.

At the conclusion of the interview, Darcy was still undecided about what his next move might be. He mentioned considering transitioning out of academia and taking a position in a related field.

Jason's story: Difficulties with growth and career development

At the time of our interview Jason described himself as a heterosexual man of mixed heritage in his mid-30s from North America. His highest qualification was a master's degree in a social science discipline. Jason migrated to Thailand directly after graduating, and spent a year working in a high school before taking up his current position at a mid-ranked Thai university. Jason had started teaching 'for the money, basically' as an alternative to his previous job as a writer. He moved to Thailand 'when the recession hit and there were no teaching jobs' back home. Even though he did not think he was 'even remotely qualified' to work in a university at the time, he did not find it challenging to get an academic position in Thailand: 'I knew the guy who used to have this desk. (laughs)... They gave me an interview and, and it was one of those interviews where it's like, they're asking me when I can start before I even decided I wanted the job'. At the time of our interview Jason had been working in his current role for six years, even though his original intention was to stay only six months.

Asked if he liked working as an academic in Thailand, Jason answered:

Not really, haha. It's just not ... I don't know. (laughs) Part of is ... just not my place. Like it's cute for a while and then it's frustrating for a while, and then it's just, just means nothing after that (laughs).

Jason identified that part of his dissatisfaction was that 'I'm in like the minor leagues here'. Recently, he had begun thinking about whether his experience in Thailand was transferable outside of the country, or whether he was stuck in his current position: 'Like just recently I've started thinking like, maybe if I went to [home country] I still wouldn't be able to be a university teacher'. One of the reasons Jason was nervous about how his career was tracking was because he felt he had not developed in the six years he had been working at a university in Thailand:

> One of the big things is, like you work ... in my experience, I've been here six years and my job is basically the same as when I first got here. There's no career path. There's no advancement. And there have been some things that they talked about over the years. But for the most part it's just, it's a job. The job is the job.

The job that Jason was discussing here had its share of disappointments. His department was 'incredibly disorganised'; 'the students here are nice kids and all, but after five years their English is still not that good to be honest'; and Jason felt that the courses he was asked to teach were often unrelated to the kinds of competencies that his students might need later in their careers.

During the interview Jason revealed his nervousness at the thought of returning to teaching in his home country, having followed news media about the changing expectations placed upon educators. Recently, Jason had been worrying if his experience in Thailand, and what he saw as the 'low standards' expected of academics in the country, had prepared him for future career mobility. Jason described many of his international colleagues working in Thai universities as 'bums', and while he felt that he was doing a good job, 'when you're out in the world, it's like, it's hard to explain what the difference is'. Jason had explored working in a university overseas and had been told 'kind of matter-of-factly' that he would not be qualified for a full-time position.

Discussion: Identifying and interrogating 'stuck' narratives among academic migrants in Thailand

Against the progress narrative: 'Stuck' academic migrants

Earlier, we defined stuckness as a felt experience, or a situation, where a subject encounters constraint, and sees few opportunities to move out, upward, or forward. We can identify stuckness across both of the narratives that we presented above and argue that both Darcy and Jason narrate 'stuck narratives'. Both participants appeared to be stuck with few employment options in their home countries prior to migration, and their decision-making about 'reverse flow' mobility to Thailand was significantly shaped by numerous constraints. For Jason, these included an economic recession and the threat of unemployment. Whereas Darcy was caught between a 'dire' job market on the one hand, and the likelihood of being separated from his partner on the other. The push factor of poor labour market conditions at 'home' has been well documented in earlier research on academic mobilities to Asia (e.g. Froese 2012).

While career stuckness at home was the identified departure point in both narratives, stuckness appeared to accumulate across their migrant experience. Thailand was configured as a disappointing mobility destination. Darcy found Bangkok unhomely, describing himself as living in a city he did not like, within a cultural context he struggled to comprehend. Darcy also found his academic position unrewarding. Despite his attempts to change his working conditions, Darcy's 'old-school lefty agitation' was unsuccessful in producing change. If we were to deploy language used in the field of human resources management (Froese 2012), Darcy might be described as a migrant who is struggling with adjustment, including across the general (non-work), interaction (contacts and relationships in host country) and workplace (teaching, research, service) domains. Importantly, stuckness is also visible as a block to further progression. Rather than progress, Darcy could only see 'all negatives in terms of uh, my academic development'. He also described himself as inhabiting the 'awkward position', of being too qualified and out of time for a postdoctoral fellowship. Darcy judges himself uncompetitive for a lecturing position in the 'still terrible' academic job market of his home country. He presents himself as the awkward subject who remains trapped in a challenging situation; this awkwardness reverberates in the questions he asks himself: 'how did I end up [here]? what am I doing?'. At the end of the narrative we see that his space for maneuverability within the academic profession appears slim, and so Darcy is investigating his exit options.

Like Darcy, Jason had also become disappointed in Thailand as a mobility destination. He described himself as stuck in a context that was 'just not my place'. Six years of employment in Thailand was summed up in an arc: from 'cute', to 'frustrating', to finally, 'nothing'. The attrition of pleasure over time had left his academic role lacking meaning; as Jason put it 'the job is the job'. By simply being the job that it is, his position did not offer other things that he wished it to confer, such as a pathway to 'a career'. In the account he offered, Jason appears tethered to a scene of repetition where opportunities for alternatives are few and far between. This repetition is even evoked in the mundane rhythm of the sentence: *the job is the job*. Jason's stuckness is perhaps most clear in data fragments which indicate his immobility: his job is 'basically the same', and there has been 'no advancement'. Not only has Jason's career not advanced, the teaching and learning environment also seems stuck: 'after five years their English is still not that good to be honest'. Jason also worries about his recognisability as an academic and how he can distinguish himself from the 'bums' that surround him because 'out in the world... it's hard to explain what the difference is'. Arguably, this potential for misrecognition is related to his perception of 'low standards' of academic professionalism in Thailand, a perception he assumes others within the global academic community will share. Jason fears that his experience working in the 'minor leagues' will also impede his ability to seek future employment at universities both 'at home' and overseas. Jason had already been informed that he did not qualify for an interview when he sought a new position elsewhere in Southeast Asia. As we concluded the interview it was unclear whether Jason would be able to move on from the job that now meant 'nothing' to him.

Clearly, the academic migration stories that we have drawn from Darcy and Jason's interviews differ from accounts which emphasise 'the acquisition of status and various forms of capital that subsequently raise career prospects and increase competitiveness in the academic labour market' (Bauder 2015, p. 8). Instead, their 'stuck' narratives extend CAMA scholarship which has problematised the notion that 'academic mobility → upward social mobility' (Leung 2017, p. 2704). Across our study we noticed narratives which presented mobility outcomes as complex, fraught and uneasy. For example, Joshua (a 35-year-old man, ethnic background not specified) agreed that migrant academics could get stuck in Thailand:

> At the university I was at before—I mean if they [colleagues] went back to [home country] ... they'd never be able to get a job at a community college. You know, ... they're not even minimally qualified for that. They have no teaching credentials, and they're kind of experienced novices maybe ... in teaching. They haven't really done the professional development. They haven't taken it seriously. And so, I think ... people get trapped sometimes.

In contrast to norms of progress and development, Joshua demonstrates how mobility can also set stuckness in motion, sometimes leaving Northern academic migrants feeling trapped in Thailand.

A decolonial approach: Interrogating mobile academic 'stuckness' in the Global South

As we identified above, Darcy and Jason appear to produce 'stuck' narratives in the telling of their migration experiences. Each participant positions himself as a mobile subject who has stalled and now has limited room to manoeuvre. Our second analytic step is to move from identifying stuckness within these narratives to interrogating how perceptions of stuckness may be related to the reproduction and enactment of core/periphery power asymmetries. Using decolonial conceptual resources (Connell 2007; 2017; Shahjahan 2016; Ma Rhea 2017; Motsa 2017), we explore why it is that the Global South in general, and Thailand in particular, are configured as 'backwards' places where Northern academic migrants get stuck. We also track how relations of domination and epistemic injustice (Walker 2018) may be reproduced via North-to-South academic mobilities.

As we argued earlier, histories of European imperialism shape the current global HE economy, which is configured with a hegemonic Northern core and a Southern periphery (Connell 2007). As Connell (2017) argues, these core/periphery discourses position the Global South as backwards in relation to the technological and intellectual 'advancement' of the Global North. Such perceptions of 'backwardness' are also reproduced in accounts of migration from the core to the periphery for academic work, as some studies have previously shown (e.g. Liu and Lin 2017). Jason and Darcy appear to find it difficult to conceive of their North-South career movements as anything other than backward because movement to Thailand is pre-positioned as downward movement in academic capital. Not only is movement to Thailand positioned as backward, it is also positioned

as incoherent because it deviates from normative success scripts for developing an academic career (see e.g. Henderson 2019 on the notions of 'normativity' and 'success'). We can notice this positioning in the language that Darcy and Jason use, describing movement to Thailand as 'unusual', 'accidental' or a 'weird path'. Within these narratives North-to-South academic mobilities appear to be configured as incoherent directions of movement, a sentiment that is perhaps reflected in the question that Darcy asks of himself in the narrative: 'How did I end up [here]? What am I doing?'. This is also clear in Jason's account where he describes his working context in Thailand as 'the minor leagues', echoing Thailand's position in the geopolitics of knowledge production discussed earlier. This incoherence is also apparent in the passages where Darcy describes his shame at working in Thailand given the elite standing of his prior degrees. While Darcy is conscious that it may be seen as arrogant to question whether one is too qualified for the position one currently holds, he questions it nevertheless. Indeed, the question that Darcy asks: 'how did I end up here?' is perhaps the very same question that he worries the reviewers of his academic papers might ask.

Because of its position on the periphery of global HE (Juntrasook and Burford 2017), Thailand is often positioned as an incoherent and less 'serious' (Eppolite and Burford 2020, p. 535) place for academic work for Northern migrants. Additionally, participants report that Thailand is a relatively easy place for Northern academics to migrate to—even if they have limited academic qualifications and experience. This was reflected in Jason's narrative, and the stories of other participants in our wider study. Given that mobility to Thailand is positioned as a 'backwards' movement to a low status destination, there also appeared to be limited interest from our participants to invest time in learning about where they are. Many participants across our study appeared to arrive to Thailand without much understanding of the history of Thai HE, or much interest in learning about the indigenous ideas of *máhaˇawíttáyaalai* (universities), *náksèuk-saˇa* (students) or *aa-jaan* (academics) once they arrived. Neither did they appear to make much effort to learn about cultural norms for working, teaching or learning, and how these may differ from those operating elsewhere. For example, a lack of knowledge about cultural norms may be visible in Darcy's attempt to encourage public conflict with superiors, a strategy that is unusual given Thai cultural norms of relational harmony and the avoidance of conflict (see Kainzbauer and Hunt 2016). What's more, very few participants from our wider dataset had attempted to learn the Thai language. Joshua identified that a disinclination to learn Thai led many mobile academics working in Thailand to feel stuck 'because they do not learn Thai, cannot appreciate differences in social expectations and make mistakes'.

Another linkage between 'South' and 'stuck' in the narratives can be seen in the intersection between mobility and knowledge systems. Previous CAMA accounts have revealed how asymmetrical core/periphery relations produce epistemic privilege and exclusions (Kenway and Fahey 2009). In our narratives, participants appeared to be assured of their Northern epistemic superiority. This is evident in Darcy's narrative when he evokes the colonising image of the missionary by positioning himself as part of the 'establishment' and Thailand as 'the frontier'. In

this narrative Darcy configures himself as a knowledge worker who heroically upholds the international (i.e. Northern) standards of his discipline in the face of isolation and poor quality on the global periphery. Yet, in 'represent[ing] the establishment' by 'bringing some of the academic culture I grew up with', arguably Darcy reproduces relations of domination. Rather than an awareness that his own knowledge may be parochial, Darcy assumes its universality and dominance over Thai knowledge systems. We could interpret this as a form of 'epistemological violence' (Heleta 2016), and a reproduction of colonial hierarchies of knowledge and knowers. We could also describe this phenomenon as one where Darcy is 'stuck' within a framework which devalues Thai knowledge systems. There are other ways in which Darcy might have positioned himself as an academic in Thailand, such as the position of the 'mutual learner'. This way of thinking might have enabled Darcy to re-think his role as simply disseminating 'establishment' knowledge. Darcy might even re-imagine his role as a migrant academic beyond adjusting to life and work in Thailand (learning about) toward the honouring of multiple epistemologies (learning from) that Connell (2007, p. 369) has previously discussed.

Concluding thoughts: Inspecting academic mobility's colonial baggage

We began writing this article because we noticed that a number of participants in our empirical study about academic migration to Thailand appeared to be feeling stuck. The two narrative portraits that we have presented here are evocative accounts which help us to explore this theme from our findings in greater depth. One thing that we have learned from following 'stuckness' around is that it is a phenomenon that can accumulate across a given narrative. As one constraint layers upon another, the felt experience of stuckness can intensify, and the wriggle room for agency can appear to shrink. While stuckness may be atomised into singular episodes, we have found that the best way to understand it is through considering its intricate dynamics.

Both Darcy and Jason described experiences of career stuckness at home in the Global North which prompted their migration to Thailand. However, stuckness was a phenomenon which endured, with both participants feeling broadly dissatisfied with their careers and lifestyles in Thailand. Not only did Darcy and Jason feel stuck in Thailand, they also expressed concerns that their movement to the country might hinder their future mobility: their experience *in* Thailand was also configured as an impediment to *exiting* Thailand. According to Darcy and Jason, their stuckness arose because Thailand's status in the global HE economy means that mobile academics who work there may struggle for recognition in international employment markets. In considering these narratives, our study offers a contribution to conversations within CAMA which have sought to interrupt normative discourses that associate academic mobilities with progress and development.

As we have progressed further with this study, we have also become interested in the intersection between narratives of stuckness and the location of Thailand in the Global South. Across our findings we have not only identified moments of stuckness in the narratives, we have also

examined how stuckness may be related to the reproduction of core/periphery power asymmetries. We have used decolonial conceptual resources (Connell 2007; 2017; Kenway and Fahey 2009) to explore why Thailand is configured as a 'backwards' mobility destination for Northern academic migrants. Within Darcy and Jason's narratives, mobility to Thailand is configured as an incoherent and 'weird path', and as one that lacks status and esteem within the global HE economy. This framing of Thailand as a 'lesser' location for academic work leads to limited investment in Thailand as a place for building a life and/or a career, for example by learning about cultural norms, or learning the Thai language. Thailand's positioning in the narratives as a 'frontier' location also enables Darcy to position himself as a more advanced and legitimate knower who is representing the Northern 'establishment'. We have shown that Darcy and Jason's positioning of Thailand in their narratives reproduces prevailing ideas of the country's lesser role within the global HE economy. By unpacking this colonial baggage, our work offers a second contribution to CAMA scholarship. We reveal the enduring inequities associated with transnational academic mobilities, including those which arise from the HE economy's core/periphery structure (Kenway and Fahey 2009).

Thus, there are two critical manoeuvres at play in the argument we have advanced across this article. The first disrupts the normative framing of mobility as 'progress' by homing in on narratives of stuckness, and the second turns back on these stuckness narratives to critically examine how and why they produce academic mobility to Thailand as a form of backward movement which leads to stuckness. Working with these narratives has left us with further questions to consider. Are Darcy and Jason 'stuck' in Thailand because of their decisions to move to a context which is positioned as peripheral in the wider economy of HE (with ensuing impacts on their academic capital)? Or, might Darcy and Jason also be stuck in their own narratives of what Thailand (and their place within it) can be? More specifically, does a narrative frame of Thailand as a lesser location for academic work leave Darcy and Jason with limited flexibility to re-imagine themselves and their possible lives/work in Thailand? Perhaps, if Darcy and Jason could re-imagine their roles in Thailand, and engage in critical reflection about the value of Thai knowledge systems, they might be better positioned to reimagine their own stories in more empowering ways.

In this article we have sought to shed light on the complex relationship between narratives of stuckness among migrant academics and locations for knowledge production in the Global South. As our findings demonstrate, it is valuable for researchers to pay close attention to questions of geopolitics and knowledge when considering why mobile subjects might produce 'stuck' narratives in their talk. We have also made additional contributions to the existing CAMA literature. While much academic mobilities research focuses on movement to the Global North, we have argued alongside others (e.g. Kim 2015), that North-to-South mobility should be contextualised within the field more broadly. By locating our study in Thailand, a destination constructed as peripheral within the global HE economy, we have been able to interrogate the

impact of core/periphery power imbalances within academic migration accounts. We hope our study will inspire future analyses which will take on these difficult questions of identity, knowledge and ethics with regard to Northern academic migration to the Global South.

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